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**“From the Theses on Feuerbach to the Philosophy of Praxis: Marx, Gramsci, Philosophy and Politics”**

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**From the *Theses on Feuerbach* to the Philosophy  
of Praxis:  
Marx, Gramsci, Philosophy and Politics**

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PhD European Studies

### Abstract

In recent years, there has been a growing literature on Gramsci's conception of the philosophy of praxis, and specifically the centrality of Marx within it. However, this has not been accompanied by serious studies of the way in which Marx's own approach to philosophy relates to Gramsci's philosophical reconstruction of the former. This study explores both Gramsci's philosophical reinterpretation of Marx, as well as Marx's own understanding of philosophy. I argue that despite the presence of parallels between them, the two thinkers ultimately have divergent conceptions of philosophy. I conclude that Gramsci went beyond Marx both in the way he critically analyzed philosophy, as well as the way in which he grasped knowledge as politics.

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## Introduction

The *Prison Notebooks* of Antonio Gramsci, composed in a Fascist prison cell in the late 1920's and early 1930's, have now come to enjoy an immense popularity and widespread diffusion on an international scale. As Joseph Buttigieg writes, 'Few twentieth century works have elicited as much widespread interest or have had as great an impact on so many diverse field of study as the *Quaderni del carcere*'.<sup>1</sup> In a similar vein, Fabio Frosini has spoken of a "worldwide Gramscian web", in which the study of Gramsci's thought is no longer simply an Italian or European phenomenon, but has become truly global.<sup>2</sup>

And yet, as others have noted,<sup>3</sup> this widespread diffusion and popularity has not necessarily been accompanied by close, philologically precise analyses of the *Notebooks*. This is particularly the case in the English-speaking world due to the absence of a full English translation of Valentino Gerratana's 1975 critical edition of Gramsci's *Notebooks*, rightly described by Buttigieg as 'the single most important event in the publication history of Gramsci's works',<sup>4</sup> as it gave readers access, for the first time, to the *Notebooks* in the original form in which they were written.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, despite the considerable portion of Gramsci's writings translated into English, these have largely remained confined to thematic anthologies and selections re-organized by the editors and which therefore, do not reflect Gramsci's original manuscripts, with the exception of Buttigieg's far from complete project of producing a critical edition of the *Notebooks* in English.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, the publication of Gerratana's critical edition, which began to produce effects in Italy in the late 1970's and early 1980's, has, especially in recent years, led to the emergence of a philologically intense "season" of Gramscian studies, now freed from the decades of politically

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<sup>1</sup> Buttigieg 1994, 99.

<sup>2</sup> Frosini 2009b, 669.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Thomas 2010, xviii, and Buttigieg 1994, 99.

<sup>4</sup> Preface to Gramsci 1992, xii.

<sup>5</sup> The *Prison Notebooks* do not have the status of a "book", in the sense of being a complete and definite work. Rather, Gramsci's prison reflections remained incomplete, tentative, and exploratory. Gramsci indicated more than once, the provisional status of his fragmentary notes, Q 4, 16, 438, Q 8, 935, Q 11, 1365. On this point, cf. Frosini 2003, 74, Francioni 1984, 152, Buttigieg 1992, x, 6-7. Frosini delineates three phases in Gramsci's prison work, characterized by a reorganization and restructuring of his research, Frosini 2003, 23-9. A philologically accurate reconstruction of the internal history of the composition of Gramsci's *Notebooks* is therefore, a prerequisite for understanding them.

<sup>6</sup> On the publication history of Gramsci's writings into English, see Buttigieg's Preface to Gramsci 1992, xii-xiv. Gramsci's prison work comprises thirty-three notebooks, four of which are dedicated to translations of mostly German texts. See Gramsci 2007b. Buttigieg has translated and edited the first eight notebooks into English. See Gramsci 1992, 1996, and 2007a.

instrumentalized readings which had occurred under the auspices of the Italian Communist Party.<sup>7</sup> One important outcome of this has been a growing interest in, and understanding of, the importance of Marx in Gramsci's theoretical reflections, particularly in prison. This is testified by the organization of conferences and symposiums, for example, in Trieste (1999) and Naples (2008),<sup>8</sup> and by a growing body of scholarship, dedicated to the topic.<sup>9</sup>

In particular, the centrality of Marx as a fundamental reference point for Gramsci's reconstruction of Marxism as a "philosophy of praxis" has begun to come to light, a process linked to a deepening understanding of the broader meaning and significance of Gramsci's philosophical reflections in prison, and the centrality of politics within them.<sup>10</sup> Long thought to be a mere synonym or camouflage for "Marxism", "historical materialism", or "Marxism-Leninism",<sup>11</sup> recent scholarship, with the help of Gerratana's critical edition, has established that this locution, whose emergence and progressive formation in the *Notebooks* can be traced, in fact represents a distinctive conception of Marxism and its unique philosophical status. As Frosini writes, the philosophy of praxis is the 'very personal version of Marxism that Gramsci elaborates in prison in discontinuity also with his own prior thought'.<sup>12</sup>

This study proposes to make a contribution to the recent literature on the nature and significance of Gramsci's re-elaboration of Marxism as a philosophy of praxis,<sup>13</sup> specifically as this depends on a distinctive re-reading of Marx, and whose center of gravity lies in the *Theses on Feuerbach*. It is on the basis of a rereading of the short text, together with a handful of others whose chronological scope, with the noteworthy exception of the 1859 Preface, is largely confined to the 1840's, that Marx becomes arguably the most important point of reference for Gramsci's concept of the philosophy of praxis, a notion that contains within itself both a unique understanding of the distinctive nature and specificity of the philosophical status of Marxism, as well as an entire conception of the nature of philosophy *tout court*.

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Frosini and Liguori (eds.) 2004, which contains contributions from multiple scholars on key concepts in Gramsci's thought, as well as the recent publication of a Gramscian Dictionary, Liguori and Voza (eds.) 2009.

<sup>8</sup> The results of which have been collected and published as books containing contributions from an array of scholars. See Musitelli and Petronio (eds.) 2001, and Di Bello (ed.) 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Giasi 2011, which provides essential insights concerning the specific Marxian texts to which Gramsci had access in prison, Izzo 2011, which traces the broad arc of Marx in Gramsci's thought from his early years to prison, and Liguori 2001 and 2004, which examine, respectively, the relation between Marx and Gramsci on the question of the state-civil society relation, and ideology.

<sup>10</sup> This is primarily the result of the pioneering research of Frosini. Cf. Frosini 2001, 2009a, 2011. The centrality of politics in Gramsci's philosophical thought has been amply demonstrated in Frosini 2003, and Thomas 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Wolfgang Fritz Haug has critically examined these positions, Haug 1999, 105-6, and 2000, 4-7.

<sup>12</sup> Frosini 2003, 16. See also Thomas 2010, 105-8.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas 2010, represents perhaps the most important, recent intervention on this topic, and certainly the most important work in English on the philosophy of praxis. See also Haug 1999, 2000, and 2001, Martelli 1996, Frosini 2004a, 2004b, and 2008.



However, the existing literature on this topic has rarely taken into account Marx's own standpoint towards philosophy as this relates to Gramsci's own, even though the latter heavily bases his conception on a particular interpretation of the former.<sup>14</sup> It is undoubtedly of the utmost importance, for an understanding of Gramsci's philosophy of praxis, to grasp the underlying meaning of Thomas's assertion that 'All of Gramsci's philosophical research in the *Prison Notebooks* could be regarded as an extended and multifaceted meditation upon . . . the second of the *Theses on Feuerbach*',<sup>15</sup> or Frosini's similar statement that the *Notebooks* must be grasped in terms of 'the way in which Gramsci resumes and radicalizes Karl Marx's "Theses on Feuerbach"'.<sup>16</sup> But if this is the case, then surely it is also necessary to comprehend what Marx himself was attempting to accomplish with his famous *Theses*, and this moreover, against the broader contextual backdrop in which the short text was situated, and in connection with the specific problems Marx was attempting to confront.

This paper seeks to overcome the disproportion between, on the one hand, the growing proliferation of detailed analyses of Gramsci's philosophical reconstruction and reinterpretation of Marx, and on the other, the largely neglected way this rereading relates to Marx's own complicated and shifting relationship to philosophy. Such an approach, it seems to me, may be fruitful in revealing insights regarding both thinkers' understandings of philosophy, the respective strengths and weaknesses of these understandings, as well as the differences and convergences between them, including their underlying possible sources and causes. Accordingly, following an exploration of Gramsci's Marx, this study proposes an analysis of Marx from the standpoint of Marx himself, his own theoretical concerns and the problems with which he was attempting to grapple. In short, the Gramsci-Marx nexus also needs to be examined as a bilateral one: from Gramsci's Marx to Marx himself, and then back to Gramsci. This study aims to carry out this circular type of analysis of the Gramsci-Marx interface, and therefore, will be equally concerned to comprehend both Marx's and Gramsci's respective understandings of philosophy.

I do so moreover, with an awareness of the highly mediated relation between the two men, and thus, the impossibility of Gramsci returning directly to Marx's work. The latter's return to and rereading of Marx presupposes the historical, political, and intellectual shifts that transpired between Marx's life and Gramsci's. In other words, an attempt to examine the interconnections between the two thinkers necessitates their placement within the specific historical, cultural, and intellectual contexts within which they lived and worked. In so doing, I keep in mind the specific set of problems and questions, both implicit and explicit, with which they were engaging and seeking critically to resolve. The particular

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<sup>14</sup> Frosini 2009a is an exception, although this is done from the perspective of Ernesto Laclau.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas 2010, 308.

<sup>16</sup> Frosini 2009b, 673.

problems that shape their thought, and the reasons why certain questions and answers are formulated rather than others can be a productive way to grasp the interconnections between them, since Gramsci and Marx are often times responding to different problems, and formulating different questions left unformulated and unanswered by the other.

Following an exploration of Gramsci's distinctive proposal for a novel philosophical conception purportedly rooted in Marx, as this takes shape around the *Theses* and a handful of other Marxian texts mainly from the 1840's, this study attempts to conduct an analysis from Marx's own standpoint, of the significance of the *Theses* in shaping and overdetermining his critical approach to philosophy, both as this represents a fundamental rupture with his earlier philosophical perspectives in the early to mid-1840's, both positive and critical, as well as the significant impact the *Theses* had on Marx's subsequent critical analysis of philosophy, particularly as this finds its fullest expression in *The German Ideology* written not long after.

I argue that Marx and Gramsci ultimately had highly divergent and opposed understandings of philosophy. Although in *The German Ideology*, Marx had outlined a critical conception of philosophy that closely resembled Gramsci's later understanding, in which philosophy was understood as an ideological mechanism of class power and domination, this analysis remained at best, tacitly implied in Marx's account of ideology within the problematic of domination, and was never further and explicitly developed. Instead, taking German idealism and the left-Hegelians as his principle reference, Marx ultimately came to see philosophy as primarily a speculative and illusory distortion of reality, confined to a limited sect of petty-bourgeois intellectuals, and whose theoretical constructions were devoid of practical effects and relevance. For the same reason, Marx totally abandoned his earlier project of attempting to critically re-appropriate and transform philosophy in the service of a proletarian-based revolutionary politics of social and human liberation. Indeed, I argue that it was above all for political reasons that Marx felt the need to abandon philosophy *tout court*. A coherent theory of revolutionary proletarian politics with a firm basis in the concrete material, historical, and social world necessitated the repudiation of the detached mysticism with which Marx came to identify all philosophy.

As I contend, this is radically at odds both with Gramsci's own philosophical views, and the philosophical views that he attributed to Marx. Rather than a speculative detachment devoid of practical power and effects, Gramsci conceived philosophy, especially in its speculative expression, as the form of consciousness with the maximum grade of practical power from the standpoint of class domination and hegemony. Precisely for this reason, Gramsci deemed it essential that Marxism critically re-appropriate and transform philosophy into a mass politics in the service of the struggle for working class power and

hegemony. In short, whereas for Marx, an effective working class politics necessitated the abandonment of philosophy, for Gramsci, it required it. I suggest that these divergences were largely the product of the different contexts and problems with which Marx and Gramsci, respectively, were concerned.

My key conclusion is, on the one hand, that Gramsci was able to elaborate a critical conception of philosophy that consistently and coherently stressed the practical power and political effects of philosophy within the framework of class domination, a type of critical approach to philosophy that Marx himself had suggested in *The German Ideology*, but was unable to fully carry out for understandable reasons connected to his own context and experiences, and on the other, that Gramsci's re-elaboration of Marx's theory as a philosophy of praxis, despite being at odds with the latter's desire to abandon philosophy, nevertheless represents a significant further development and enrichment of Marx's own concept of the unity of theory and practice embodied in the self-emancipative revolutionary praxis of the proletariat, a philosophical conception which becomes explicable against the historical backdrop of the reinsertion of philosophy into the Marxist tradition beginning with the late Engels's re-appropriation of philosophy and the subsequent emergence of dialectical materialism, and Gramsci's own counterposed approach to resurrect Labriola's distinctive conception of Marxism as a philosophy of praxis.

The overall structure of this study corresponds to the above stated aims. While the first three chapters attempt to trace and interpret the way in which Gramsci reconstructs Marx's theory as a philosophy of praxis in conjunction with a broader attempt to re-conceptualize the entire nature of philosophy as a whole, chapters Four and Five seek to grasp Marx's own critical trajectory through philosophy, from the early 1840's into the rupture of the *Theses*, followed by the complicated effects of this rupture as these manifest themselves in Marx's critique of philosophy in *The German Ideology*. In chapter Six I bring the threads of the two analyses together, which is followed by a short conclusion.

Chapter One examines Gramsci's initial attempt to resurrect and establish Marx's *Theses* as the essential core and foundation of an independent and original philosophical construction, one which not only determines the distinctive philosophical status of Marxism, but also displaces the traditional concept of philosophy as a whole onto an alternative terrain. I argue that this enterprise has its fundamental point of orientation in Labriola's distinctive conception of Marx's thought as a philosophy of praxis rooted in a novel, non-metaphysical concept of immanence. By attempting to revitalize Labriola's philosophical interpretation, Gramsci is intervening in an earlier Italian debate over Marx and the meaning of his *Theses*, in order to challenge more contemporary positions that attempted to fuse Marxism with traditional philosophical forms of materialism and idealism. In Labriola, Gramsci finds the key thread for the independence and originality of Marxism as a philosophy.

Chapter Two dissects the way in which this new philosophical conception starts to take shape around a heterodox rereading of multiple Marxian texts, and in which the *Theses* serve as the organizing center. Gramsci's fusion of truth with ideology creates the original framework within which he starts to redefine the whole of philosophy in terms of its political and ideological effects on the terrain of struggle and conflict. Within this prism, I argue that the specificity of Marxism as a distinctive philosophy of praxis, as this begins to implicitly emerge, lies in its status as a self-conscious mode of interpreting and understanding the antagonistic social world "from within" it (immanently), that is, necessarily within the political field of social conflicts, and from a particular political and ideological standpoint assumed within it. In this way, Labriola's earlier stress on Marx's thought as an immanent form of philosophizing from the partial standpoint or visual angle of the proletariat, becomes the basis for Gramsci's own reformulation of Marxism as a philosophy of praxis.

Chapter Three deals with Gramsci's breakthrough in 1932, in which the earlier threads of his philosophical research issue in a fundamental redefinition of philosophy as hegemony, the fruit of an extended confrontation with Croce's speculative philosophical thought. Within this broader redefinition of philosophy, the specificity of Marx's thought as a philosophy of praxis is now explicitly elaborated as an absolute immanence, or an absolute worldliness and earthliness of thought, on the basis of Marx's eleventh and second theses on Feuerbach. In this conception, the philosophy of praxis assumes the form of an immanent critique of common sense, in which Marx's concept of the unity of theory and practice is developed in terms of a distinctive notion of coherence and the capacity to act. In this way, Gramsci radically reformulates philosophy as a mass politics in the service of the working class struggle for hegemony.

Chapter Four traces Marx's early philosophical development in the young Hegelian movement. My principal thesis is that Marx's attempt to critically re-appropriate and transform philosophy into a mass politics in the service of a project of social and political transformation, and human liberation, represents only a transient phase in his thinking, which he abandoned once he discovered that the workers could actively develop and appropriate theoretical consciousness for themselves within the framework of politics and the class struggle, and consequently, could be the active agents of their own emancipation. Marx attempts to situate this political conception within the philosophical framework of Feuerbach's materialist humanism, a schema which also constitutes the basis for Marx's critique of speculative idealist philosophy as an inverted form of alienation and self-estrangement of the true "essence of man" as a material and social being.

Chapter Five analyzes both the nature and consequences of the fundamental rupture that takes place in the *Theses* for Marx's critical understanding of philosophy. I argue that the break with Feuerbach's materialist humanism opens out to two conflicting critiques of philosophy within the terms of his conception of ideology, one according to which philosophy (and ideology) are understood mainly as illusory distortions without practical effects, while in the other, philosophy and ideology are analyzed in terms of their efficacious functioning as forms of social consciousness that help cement and solidify material conditions of class rule and domination. I suggest that this latter analysis, much more profound and historically original than the former, remained only implicit, as Marx was much more emphatic regarding the essential character of philosophy (and sometimes ideology) as illusions without practical weight. On the other hand, I propose that the decisive factor for Marx's scathing repudiation of all philosophy was political. A coherent conception of revolutionary proletarian praxis with a concrete historical basis in economic and social relations, represented for Marx, the fundamental antithesis to the speculative fancies and elitism of the left Hegelians.

Chapter Six reexamines Gramsci's rereading of Marx in light of the analysis of the latter in the previous two chapters. It affirms the radically different approaches the two thinkers have towards philosophy, despite the noticeable convergences between Marx's critique of philosophy as an ideological mechanism reinforcing class domination and Gramsci's own conception of speculative philosophy as a form of ruling class hegemony. Nevertheless, I contend that Gramsci's conception of Marx's theory as an absolute immanence represents a further enrichment of Marx's concept of the this-worldliness of proletarian revolutionary practice, as a more sophisticated conception of the dynamics of knowing and interpreting within political struggles which highlights the partial and contingent nature of political truths.

I conclude that the differences between the two thinkers' respective approaches to philosophy hinge heavily on their different contextual environments and the different problems they needed to address. The strengths of Gramsci's reinterpretation are connected to the more complex and historically advanced situation within which he was working, as well as to the more sophisticated political conceptions that were developed to cope with them, particularly as this relates to hegemony. That being said, Gramsci's rereading was ultimately an instrumentalized one dictated by the exigencies of his own conjuncture, and in which little attempt was made to carry out his own methodological prescriptions for an effective and accurate understanding of Marx.

## Notes on the text

References to Gerratana's critical edition of the *Quaderni del carcere* (designated as "Q" due to the frequency of citations), follows the standard of notebook number, following by note number, following by page number. Thus, for example, a reference to Notebook 4, note 3, page 300 appears: Q 4, 3, 300.

Notes only existing as a single version and not crossed out by Gramsci are "B texts". First versions of notes later crossed out are "A texts". Notes containing elements of earlier notes are "C texts".

The dates provided for some of the notes follow Gianni Francioni's chronology.<sup>17</sup>

References to Marx's Collected Works (designated as "CW" due to the frequency of citations) take the form of volume number, followed by the page number. Thus, a reference to volume 5, page 5, appears: CW: 5: 5.

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<sup>17</sup> Francioni 1984, 140-6.

## **Chapter One**

### **Gramsci, Labriola, and a non-metaphysical concept of immanence**

#### **1.1 The pre-prison Gramsci**

Gramsci's intellectual formation took place within the neo-Hegelian idealist culture led by Benedetto Croce and Giovanni Gentile, who were vehemently opposed to the positivist culture that prevailed in Northern Italy in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In opposition to what they saw as a vulgar evolutionist scientism and positivist stress on empirical facts and laws, Croce and Gentile stressed the autonomy of the human spirit and action. Gramsci's early Marxism was heavily mediated by the neo-idealist emphasis on human thought, will, and action, against the positivist determinism which reigned in the Italian Socialist Party, and the Second International more broadly.<sup>1</sup> Thus, for exemplar, Gramsci wrote in 1914, that 'Revolutionaries see history as a product of their own spirit'.<sup>2</sup> Later, in 1916, he wrote that critical socialism rests solidly on Germanic idealism, in total opposition to vulgar positivism and Catholic transcendence.<sup>3</sup> A year later, he praised Lenin and the Bolshevik Revolutionaries, seeing in the Russian Revolution, a confirmation of his own anti-positivist voluntarism and philosophical idealist tendencies: 'they live Marxist thought - that thought which is eternal, which represents the continuation of German and Italian idealism, and which in the case of Marx was contaminated by positivist and naturalist encrustations'.<sup>4</sup>

Evidently, Marx himself, according to the young Gramsci, had been tainted by positivist and naturalist elements. This was not surprising since, in Gramsci's 1918 judgment, 'Marx was not a philosopher by profession', whereas on the other hand, 'it is certain that the essence of his doctrine is dependent on philosophical idealism'.<sup>5</sup> In this early period, as Francesca Izzo remarks, 'Marx appears to Gramsci to be somewhat of an obstacle 'to a spiritually conscious and active vision of socialism and to corresponding political action', and was thus, reinterpreted through the filter of neoidealism'.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Coutinho 2012, 3-12, Basile 2011, 117-28, Izzo 2009, 23-32.

<sup>2</sup> Gramsci 1980, 11.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 392.

<sup>4</sup> Gramsci 1982, 514.

<sup>5</sup> Gramsci 1984, 348-9.

<sup>6</sup> Izzo 2011, 81.

Gramsci's youthful idealist tendencies were significantly tempered under the impact of his active participation in the Factory Councils' movement in 1919-20, the rise fascism, his subsequent struggles with Amadeo Bordiga within the newly-formed Italian Communist Party, and his emergence as leader of the Party prior to his imprisonment, during which the concrete realities of political struggle came to the fore.<sup>7</sup> The central problematic that emerged, under the impact of Lenin and Gramsci's contacts in Moscow with leading figures in the Third International, consisted in the political struggle for hegemony, or leadership, of the working class in a bloc of alliances with other classes and strata of society, on the basis of which the Italian Communist party could be transformed into a mass-based party, organically rooted in the popular classes.<sup>8</sup> This process requires that the proletariat overcome its corporatism or syndicalist tendencies, i.e. its immediate sectional and class interests, by taking into account the needs and demands of the broad social strata with which it must constitute a political alliance. The political struggle for proletarian hegemony within the more complex state structures of Western Europe would become the central motif in the *Notebooks*. As Thomas writes, the 'guiding thread that organizes all of Gramsci's carceral research can be succinctly characterized as *the search for an adequate theory of proletarian hegemony in the epoch of the "organic crisis" or the "passive revolution" of the bourgeois "integral state"*'.<sup>9</sup>

Significantly, it was during the years immediately preceding his imprisonment (1924-26), that Gramsci began to demonstrate a heightened interest in Marx, as testified by a letter written in January 1924 in which, drawing up educational plans for the Party, Gramsci proposed the need for studies and translations of a number of Marxist theoretical texts, including an anthology on historical materialism, composed solely of writings by Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, which Gramsci had been translating, Engels's *Anti-Dühring* and *Socialism Utopian and Scientific*, Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, and *The Civil War in France*.<sup>10</sup>

This growing interest, to a certain extent, foreshadows Gramsci's veritable "return to Marx" in the *Notebooks*. The rediscovery of Marx while in prison involves a drastic shift away from Gramsci's youthful conception, according to which Marx was philosophically weak, and his thinking tainted by

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Fiori 1971, 115-211, Coutinho 2012 13-37.

<sup>8</sup> On hegemony, cf. Thomas 2010, Ch. 5, 6, and 7, Buci-Glucksmann 1980, 47-111, and Boothman 2011, 55-67.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas 2010, 136. On passive revolution, cf. Voza 2004, 189-207. On the integral state, cf. Buci-Glucksmann 1980, 19-282. On organic crisis, cf. Liguori and Voza (eds.) 2009, 180-2

<sup>10</sup> Gramsci 2014, 213-6. As Izzo notes, prior to the years 1924-25, Marx is only one among a number of authors on which Gramsci relies, and is furthermore, not one of the most important of them, Izzo 2011, 81. Izzo has also indicated the likely contents of the anthology on historical materialism referred to by Gramsci in his letter, which included texts such as *The Poverty of Philosophy*, *The Class Struggles in France*, *Wage labor and capital*, and number of other works on political economy, Izzo 2009, 46.



positivism. Instead of filtering Marx's supposed positivism through the mediation of neo-Hegelian categories, Gramsci comes to see Marx as the founder of a wholly independent and original conception of the world, a new philosophy which not only supersedes all prior philosophical thought, but fundamentally redefines the entire nature of philosophy itself.

## 1.2 The "return" to Marx in the *Prison Notebooks*

The commencement of Notebook 4, dating from May 1930, signals emphatically what Christine Buci-Glucksmann, Frosini, and Izzo all refer to as Gramsci's 'astonishing "return to Marx"'.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the fourth notebook, the first of a bloc of notebooks bearing the title "Notes on Philosophy. Materialism and Idealism", represents the start of an extended reflection and meditation concerning the nature, meaning, and significance of Marx's thought, one which is furthermore, explicitly philosophical and pursued continuously over the course of Notebooks 7 and 8 (the second and third series respectively, of "Notes on Philosophy. Materialism and Idealism").<sup>12</sup> From the outset, this enterprise is structured around a determinate plan, namely, that

The essential part of historical materialism . . . of Marxism consists in its surpassing of the old philosophies and also in its way of conceiving philosophy – and this is what must be systematically demonstrated and developed. In the realm of theory, Marxism is not to be confused with or reduced to any other philosophy; it is original not only because it surpasses previous philosophies but also, and above all, because it opens up a completely new road: in other words, it renews from top to bottom the whole way of conceiving philosophy.<sup>13</sup>

More specifically, as Gramsci elaborates,

Hegel . . . joined the two moments of philosophical life, materialism and spiritualism, dialectically. Hegel's successors destroyed this unity, returning to the old materialism with Feuerbach and to the spiritualism of the Hegelian right. In his youth, Marx relived this whole experience: Hegelian, Feuerbachian materialist, Marxist; in other words, he reformed the destroyed unity into a new philosophical construction: this new construction of his, this new philosophy is already clearly evident in the theses on Feuerbach. Many historical materialists

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<sup>11</sup> Buci-Glucksmann 1980, 21, Frosini 2001, 33, Izzo 2011, 82.

<sup>12</sup> Chronologically extending from May 1930 - May 1932.

<sup>13</sup> Q 4, 11, 432-3.

have done to Marx what had already been done to Hegel; in other words, they have gone from dialectical unity back to crude materialism, while, as has already been said, modern vulgar idealist high culture has tried to incorporate those elements of Marxism that it needed – also because this modern philosophy has itself sought, in its own way, to join materialism and spiritualism dialectically, just as Hegel had tried to do and as Marx really did.<sup>14</sup>

According to Gramsci, the essential core of Marx's theory, that is so-called "historical materialism",<sup>15</sup> lies in the supersession of all past traditional philosophies, in particular the classic opposition between materialism and idealism, on the basis of a novel and original philosophical construction achieved by Marx in his *Theses*, in other words, a new way of conceiving the nature of philosophy itself that leads to 'the overthrow of the question of philosophy from its traditional position . . . the death of philosophy in the traditional sense'.<sup>16</sup> It is thus that Gramsci, from the very beginning of his return to Marx in the *Notebooks*, establishes arguably the central project that will consume him throughout his prison reflections, consisting in the systematic attempt to demonstrate and develop the thesis that the essential part of Marx's historical materialism lies in the supersession of all past traditional philosophy on the basis of an original philosophical construction, i.e. a new and original conception of the world implicit in, but never systematically expounded by Marx himself.<sup>17</sup>

Gramsci's assertion that the new philosophical conception finds its matrix in the *Theses* is somewhat bewildering. For he had claimed, in the opening note to Notebook 4 in which he adumbrates what he construes to be the most appropriate methodological approach to studying and interpreting Marx's thought, that 'if one wants to know Marx, one must look for him above all in his authentic works, published under his own personal direction'.<sup>18</sup> And yet, as Georges Labica notes, Marx's *Theses* were merely personal manuscript notes written for himself, never intended for publication, and that it was Engels's decision to have them posthumously published, in a modified form, as an appendix to his *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* in 1888.<sup>19</sup> Also noteworthy is the radical departure Gramsci's claim represents in relation to his pre-prison writings, in which, as Frosini has

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<sup>14</sup> Q 4, 3, 424.

<sup>15</sup> A locution coined by Engels and never used by Marx.

<sup>16</sup> Q 1, 132, 119.

<sup>17</sup> Q 4, 1, 419-20, Q 4, 39, 465.

<sup>18</sup> Q 4, 1, 420.

<sup>19</sup> Labica 1980, 160-1. According to Engels himself, the *Theses* were 'notes hurriedly scribbled down for later elaboration, absolutely not intended for publication', but nevertheless 'invaluable as the first document in which the brilliant germ of the new world outlook is deposited', Engels 1976, 3. It may have been from Engels's own judgment that Gramsci similarly saw in Marx's *Theses*, the basis for a new and original conception of the world.

pointed out, there is not a single reference to the *Theses*.<sup>20</sup> In fact, the elevated status attributed by Gramsci to Marx's *Theses* for a re-evaluation of the latter's thinking was more or less contemporaneous with the receipt of a German anthology of Marxian texts,<sup>21</sup> amongst which was the redacted Engelsian version of Marx's short manuscript, requested in a letter to Tatiana Schucht dated March 24<sup>th</sup>, 1930, and received sometime during the period from March to November 1930,<sup>22</sup> and which chronologically corresponds to the composition of the first series of "Notes on Philosophy" in Notebook 4.<sup>23</sup>

Crucially, the affirmation of the philosophical specificity and autonomy of Marx's thought, latent in the theory of historical materialism, and rooted in the supersession of traditional philosophical conceptions of materialism and idealism, had already been advanced by Antonio Labriola, a debt explicitly acknowledged by Gramsci.<sup>24</sup> Claiming that Marx's thought has been adulterated through its erroneous fusion with variants of vulgar philosophical materialism (Plekhanov, Bukharin) and idealism (Croce, Sorel, Bergson, etc., and within the "official" Marxist camp, the neo-Kantianism of Austro-Marxism), Gramsci asserts that 'Labriola is differentiated from . . . these currents by his affirmation that Marxism is itself an independent and original philosophy. This is the direction in which one must work, resuming and developing Labriola's position',<sup>25</sup> or as he put it a month later, 'Labriola, who asserts that the philosophy of Marxism is contained within Marxism itself, is *the only one* who has sought to provide historical materialism with a scientific foundation', and furthermore that 'Labriola should be put back into circulation . . . his formulation of the philosophical question should be made to prevail'.<sup>26</sup> This view is at the base of Gramsci's conception of Marxist "orthodoxy":

Orthodoxy is not to be looked for in this or that disciple of Marx, in this or that tendency connected with currents extraneous to Marxism, but rather in the concept that Marxism is sufficient unto itself and contains in itself all the fundamental elements not only for constructing a whole conception of the world, an entire philosophy, but also for giving life to a complete practical organization of society, that is, for becoming an integral, complete civilization.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Frosini 2001, 39.

<sup>21</sup> Marx, *Lohnarbeit und Kapital: Zur Judenfrage und andere Schriften aus der Fruhzeit*, edited by E. Drahn, Leipzig: Reclams Universal Bibliothek.

<sup>22</sup> Frosini 2004a, 99.

<sup>23</sup> Francioni 1984, 141.

<sup>24</sup> On Labriola, cf. Dal Pane 1975.

<sup>25</sup> Q 4, 3, 422.

<sup>26</sup> Q 3, 31, 309 (my italics). Gramsci reaffirms these statements in the C-texts of Q 4, 3 and Q 3, 31, respectively Q 16, 9, 1854-5 (1934), and Q 11, 70, 1507-8 (end 1932 or early 1933).

<sup>27</sup> Q 4, 14, 435. It is already clear that Gramsci's initial return to Marx, including the appeal to Labriola, involves, from the outset, an attempt to disentangle his thought from the metaphysics of dialectical materialism that, beginning with the late Engels, had become the orthodox view concerning the philosophical status of Marxism by

Is this appeal to Labriola's philosophical importance merely formal, or is it, rather, constitutive of a more substantive appropriation of Labriola's thinking regarding the philosophical status of Marxism? According to Marco Vanzulli, despite Gramsci's claims to the contrary, 'Labriola is a marginal figure' in the *Notebooks*.<sup>28</sup> Analogously, Cesare Luporini and Giovanni Mastroianni both posit a fundamental theoretical discontinuity between Gramsci and Labriola.<sup>29</sup> As some have noted, Labriola was not one of the major influences on the thinking of the young Gramsci.<sup>30</sup> And yet, as Frosini correctly points out, notwithstanding the paucity of pre-prison references to Labriola, the ones that exist are all laudatory judgments of the latter's exceptional theoretical significance for Italian Marxism, thus anticipating to some extent Gramsci's identification, in the *Notebooks*, of Labriola as 'the only true representative of theoretical marxism *tout court*'.<sup>31</sup>

The primary concern of this chapter will be that of demonstrating the Labriolan matrix of Gramsci's approach to understanding the philosophical status of Marx's thought. More particularly, I try to show that there is an organic interconnection between the central elements that define Gramsci's initial "return to Marx" in 1930, namely:

- the repeated assertion of the philosophical specificity, autonomy, and originality of Marx's historical materialism, rooted in the supersession of the traditional philosophical opposition between materialism and idealism in a new synthesis
- the claim that Marx developed a new, non-metaphysical concept of immanence
- the celebration of Labriola's philosophical position concerning historical materialism, as the key figure to have asserted and recognized the philosophical autonomy and originality of Marx's thought
- The identification of the *Theses* as the primary text in which the new philosophy is implicitly contained

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the 1920's and 30's through the work of Plekhanov, Lenin, Bukharin, and eventually Stalin. This involved the transformation of dialectics into laws applicable to the whole of reality, nature, and human thought, with the consequence that Marxism became a metaphysical and ontological account of the fundamental nature and structure of all reality, constituted by the dialectical movement of matter. Cf. Jordan 1967, Haug 2001, 84-5. Thus, Gramsci distinguishes Marx from Engels's philosophical systematizations in *Anti-Dühring*, Q 4, 1, 420. Later in the *Notebooks*, this becomes more intense, as Gramsci links Bukharin's philosophical errors to Engels's earlier philosophical systematizations, Q 15, 31, 1786.

<sup>28</sup> Vanzulli 2013, 170.

<sup>29</sup> Luporini 1974, 33, and Mastroianni 1976, 11, 15-6.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Garin 1983, 160, Gerratana 1972, 157.

<sup>31</sup> Frosini 2001, 43.

By attempting to illustrate the underlying coherence between these aspects of Gramsci's project of re-reading Marx, and its foundation in Labriola, I argue, not for the theoretical identity between the two thinkers' conceptions of Marx's thought as a "philosophy of praxis" (for as we will see later on, Gramsci makes his own distinctive philosophical intervention within the framework of Marxism). Rather, I contend that what Labriola provides for Gramsci is the *basic framework* for the development of a non-idealist, non-metaphysical conception of immanence, in which theory is not transcendent, but instead, immanent in the historical, material, social, and political practices it seeks to comprehend, the consequence of which is the unavoidable partiality of thought and knowledge. This understanding of the being-thought nexus in terms of the concrete, immanent unity of theory and practice in turn forms the foundation on which both the transcendent metaphysical dualism between being and thought, philosophical materialism and idealism, as well as the speculative metaphysical identification of thought and reality characteristic of modern idealist concepts of immanence can be repudiated.

### 1.3 Labriola

In a series of letters to Georges Sorel, *Socialism and Philosophy* (1898),<sup>32</sup> Labriola indeed attempted to defend the thesis that Marx's historical materialism contained within itself, its own distinctive philosophical conception of the world in opposition to other philosophies.<sup>33</sup> Without explicitly referencing the *Theses*, Labriola famously argued,

Here we have arrived once more at the *philosophy of praxis*, which is the pith of historical materialism. It is the immanent philosophy of things about which people philosophize. The realistic process leads first from life to thought, not from thought to life. It leads from work, from the labor of cognition, to understanding as an abstract theory, not from theory to cognition. It leads from wants, and therefore from various feelings of well-being or illness resulting from the satisfaction or neglect of these wants, to the creation of the poetical myth of supernatural forces, not vice-versa. In these statements lies the secret of a phrase used by Marx, which has been the cause of much racking for some brains. He said that he had turned the dialectics of Hegel *right side up*. This means in plain words that the rhythmic movement of *The Idea Itself* (the

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<sup>32</sup> Gramsci did not have this text with him in prison, but he owned a copy, and had most certainly read it. See Buttigieg's "Notes" in Gramsci 1992, 441.

<sup>33</sup> Labriola 1912, 14, 23, 62.

spontaneous generation of thought!) was set aside and the rhythmic movements of real things adopted, a movement which ultimately produces thought.

Historical materialism, then, or *the philosophy of praxis*, takes account of man as a social and historical being. It gives the last, blow to all forms of idealism which regard actually existing things as mere reflexes, reproductions, imitations, illustrations, results, of so-called *a priori* thought, thought before the fact. It marks also the end of naturalistic materialism, using this term in the sense which it had up to a few years ago. The intellectual revolution, which has come to regard the processes of human history as absolutely objective ones, is simultaneously accompanied by that intellectual revolution which regards the philosophical mind itself as a product of history. This mind is no longer for any thinking man a fact which was never in the making, an event which had no causes, an eternal entity which does not change, and still less the creature of one sole act. It is rather a process of creation in perpetuity.<sup>34</sup>

Implicit in Marx's materialist conception of history is a new "philosophy of praxis"<sup>35</sup> that signals a fundamental rupture both with metaphysical idealism and previous forms of philosophical materialism, including both its naturalistic, positivist and metaphysical, ontological variants.<sup>36</sup> It does so by grounding human thought in the concrete historical and social process, that is the historical self-development of human beings who, impelled by material needs and interests, work to transform the conditions of their natural environment in order to satisfy these needs. This occurs on the material basis of conscious human labor and the production process, through which new techniques, instruments, and means of production are developed. Successive social forms and structures are, in turn, engendered through the process of producing and reproducing the material means of human existence: 'History is the work of man in so far as man can create and improve his instruments of labor, and with these instruments can create an artificial environment whose complicated effects react later upon himself, and which by its present state and its successive modifications is the occasion and the condition of his development',<sup>37</sup> making clear that the "artificial environment" consists in a determinate ensemble of social forms and relations: 'history rests, before all else, upon the development of technique, that is to say . . . the successive discovery of tools gives rise to the successive distributions of labor, and therewith to the inequalities whose sum total, more or less stable, forms the social organism . . . By producing successively the different social environment, that is to say, the successive artificial foundations, man has produced himself'.<sup>38</sup> In addition to the

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 60-1.

<sup>35</sup> It was Labriola who coined this term.

<sup>36</sup> Labriola 1908, 98-9.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 120.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 121.

creation of historically variable social forms, the productive activities of humans lead to the emergence of corresponding habits, customs, and modes of thought, which also have reciprocal conditioning effects on humans themselves.<sup>39</sup> The elixir of the historical process consists in the active and creative self-development of human beings through conscious labor and productive activity within historically variable social, cultural, and intellectual forms or ensembles. In short, human existence is always necessarily historical, and is historical precisely due to the evolving practical life activities of humans in order to fulfill changing material and practical needs.<sup>40</sup> It is therefore also necessarily social, since human labor is always organized in determine social relations.<sup>41</sup>

It follows that thought necessarily emerges and develops within the framework of, and on the basis of practical social life within concrete historical conditions. As Labriola repeatedly argued, ‘Ideas do not fall from heaven’. Instead, they are always historically produced and constituted as material, social, and practical relations.<sup>42</sup> It is the ‘practical interrelations of social life’ that ‘are the ground in which are rooted and materialized’ the various forms of social and intellectual consciousness.<sup>43</sup> Within this prism, Marx’s theory of historical materialism, as a philosophy of praxis, is distinguished precisely by the fact that it is a theory that is not transcendent, but rather, immanent in a non-metaphysical sense to the social practices from which it emerges, and which it seeks to comprehend in order to transform. Labriola’s conception of Marxist theory as an immanent philosophy in fact represents a distinctive intervention in the history of Western philosophy. On the basis of a brief sketch of the historical genealogy of the concept of immanence in Western thought, the specificity of this theoretical intervention will be illuminated, one that moreover, would prove to be important for Gramsci’s own understanding of the philosophical autonomy of Marx’s thought.

#### **1.4 Prior concepts of immanence**

While etymologically, the term “immanence”, derived from a Latin root meaning “to stay, wait, or remain within”, signifies “the state of being within”, as opposed to “transcendence”, which is derived

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 118, 121.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. 64, 160.

<sup>41</sup> Labriola 1912, 43.

<sup>42</sup> Labriola 1908, 157-9.

<sup>43</sup> Labriola 1912, 59.

from a Latin root meaning “from or beyond”,<sup>44</sup> it was only with the theoretical work of the medieval scholastic tradition that the word crystallized into a determinate concept in Western thought.<sup>45</sup> In scholastic discourse, the term was employed as an adjective to describe the notion of an immanent act, as opposed to a transcendent act, the former denoting ‘an action that remains within the agent performing it, in contrast to the latter, which ‘produces effects on an object that lies beyond the performing agent’.<sup>46</sup> In other words, an act is immanent when the object and effects of an action remain within the acting agent, in contrast to a transitive act, in which the object and effects of an action are separate or beyond the agent itself. The agent of an action, in this sense, is immanent to the objects and effects of its own acts.

The further development of this scholastic notion appears to be closely bound up with the emergence of pantheistic metaphysical doctrines, particularly that of Giordano Bruno, who formulated a monist ontological philosophy in the late Renaissance period, and which bears a close resemblance to Baruch Spinoza’s later conception of an immanent cause. Bruno conceived reality as composed of one, unitary, and infinite substance, namely God. Since this substance is infinite, there can be no other substance or component of reality outside of God, otherwise God would have limits and boundaries, and thus, would not be infinite. As a consequence, the effects of God, that is, the whole of reality, nature, and the universe, including all the particular entities found within it, instead of constituting a reality lying beyond God, are the various forms, manifestations, and modalities of God itself, as the one substance. Both the objects and effects of God’s creative acts remain wholly within God as the sole, infinite substance or reality. Analogously, despite the fact that, as Paul Kristeller points out, ‘there seems to be no tangible evidence that Spinoza was familiar with Bruno’s thought or writings’,<sup>47</sup> Spinoza nevertheless formulated a metaphysical doctrine, very much like Bruno’s, in which God is conceived as the sole, unitary substance or reality. Furthermore, like Bruno, God is considered to be infinite and all-embracing. Consequently, the material, spatio-temporal world of nature, as the product or effect of God, is identical to the latter, who is co-extensive with the entirety of reality.<sup>48</sup> This understanding of the identity of God with nature or reality constitutes the basis for Spinoza’s notion of an immanent cause. As Thomas describes it, since ‘the one substance includes everything, an object of God’s actions separate from Him is inconceivable, just as an effect of such actions that is not already a part of their cause, i.e. God Himself, is impossible’.<sup>49</sup> Thus was forged the concept of immanence in terms of immanent acts or causes, in which

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<sup>44</sup> Lilla 2012.

<sup>45</sup> For other accounts of the various conceptions of immanence in the Western intellectual tradition, cf. Yovel 1989, Frosini 2004b 2, and Thomas 2010, 320-22, on which my own account is largely based.

<sup>46</sup> Thomas 2010, 320-1.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 132.

<sup>48</sup> Yovel 1989, 27-33.

<sup>49</sup> Thomas 2010, 321.



both the objects and effects of an agent's actions necessarily remain within, or are immanent, rather than external or transcendent, to the performing agent itself.

This sense of immanence, thus far developed on the terrain of metaphysics and ontology, was reformulated by Kant in an epistemological register. In Kant's usage, the categories of pure understanding are immanent insofar as their synthetic activity is confined to the phenomenal realm of possible experience, as opposed to transcendent principles of reason that exceed the bounds of possible experience. Hence, while the pre-Kantian notion of immanence denoted the metaphysical and ontological unity or immanence of God with the objects and effects of his acts and creations, Kant re-conceptualized the concept in terms of the unity or immanence of perceiving and knowing human subjects, and in particular, the a priori forms and modalities within which reality is experienced and represented, with the realm of possible objects of experience and knowledge by which the former are confronted. The knowing subject does not therefore relate to a qualitatively different, external or transcendent reality of objective entities to which the former's experiential and conceptual representations must somehow conform, but rather confronts objects whose determinative features conform to those of the knowing subject.<sup>50</sup>

Nevertheless, there is a sense in which Kant's epistemological concept of immanence, and the unity of subject and object embodied therein, is incomplete, because it still contains elements of transcendence. On one hand, as Will Dudley writes,

The categories necessarily used by the thinking subject must also apply to the objects of thinking . . . the thinking subject and the object of thought are identical in the sense that they share the same constitutive features or "determinations": the categories, or necessary conceptual determinations, that the subject uses to think its object are also the determinations of the object that it thinks.<sup>51</sup>

Yet, on the other hand, Kant believes in an independently-constituted, noumenal reality of objects as they exist in themselves, which is inaccessible to perceiving and knowing subjects. In other words, the unity of subject and object is limited to the phenomenal realm of experienced and knowable reality, while there remains an external and transcendent, noumenal reality which is inaccessible to and separate from the subjects of knowledge.<sup>52</sup> It was precisely this break-up of the unity of subject and object, and the skeptical criticisms generated thereby, which motivated post-Kantian German idealist philosophers to seek a more solid and secure foundation for synthetic a priori metaphysical knowledge, an enterprise involving the

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<sup>50</sup> Dudley 2007, 15, 19, 22, 24, 28.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. 144.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

development of alternative, wholly immanentist conceptions in the unitary relation between subject and object.

Fichte, in attempting to insulate critical philosophy from skeptical criticisms, grounded his philosophical system in a self-conscious, absolute (“I”), who posits a reality of objects (“not-I”) seemingly distinct from itself. Under this idealist conception, the whole of being or reality is constituted by the synthetic activities of the self-conscious “I”.<sup>53</sup> Nothing therefore lies beyond the “I”, which is immanent in the reality it has ideally posited. In contrast to Fichte’s absolute epistemological foundation, Schelling, much like Spinoza, grounds philosophy in the existence of a self-constituting ontological absolute, a unitary, infinite, and all-embracing mental substance which is thus immanent in the whole of reality, and which constitutes the basis for absolute knowledge.<sup>54</sup> Hegel inherited Schelling’s belief in an ontological or metaphysical absolute. The infinite, absolute Spirit retrospectively reveals its immanence in the finite realm of being and actuality, which it both constitutes and which is, in turn, constituted by it.<sup>55</sup> Spirit or Mind is therefore immanent in reality, the identity of the rational and the real.<sup>56</sup>

Despite the complex shifts and reformulations characteristic of the historical development of the category of immanence in Western thought, it is nevertheless possible to extract, from these varying and contrasting interpretations, a common element which accounts for the status of immanence as a distinct and determinate concept in the Western intellectual tradition. The various conceptions adumbrated above are all concerned with the nature of the relationship between the object and subject of knowledge, reality and thought, material and ideal, and whose immanentist status consists in conceiving the relationship between these binaries in terms of a unity or identity, in contrast to transcendent conceptions which posit a division or separation between them. From the scholastic notion of an immanent act, in which both the objects and effects of the acts of an agent remain within the agent itself, was derived the conception of immanent cause, in which God or the absolute substance is immanent to the reality or objective realm of being of which it is the causal and constitutive source. The concept underwent a decisive shift through Kant’s attempt to demonstrate the possibility of a priori synthetic metaphysical knowledge, in which the category denoted, not the immanence of God or a divine absolute substance to reality, but rather the immanence of individual knowing subjects’ reasoning capacities to the phenomenal reality of objects of possible experience. Discontent with the unbridgeable gap between the conceptual representations of knowing subjects and objective reality in Kant’s thought, the further development of German philosophy after Kant involved attempts to close this gap by identifying thought and reality, from Fichte’s subjective

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid. 80, 82-3, 86-92.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. 110-3.

<sup>55</sup> Min 1976, 61-87.

<sup>56</sup> Yovel 1989, 31-44.

idealism to the absolute idealism of Schelling and Hegel. As Thomas argues, with the development of post-Kantian German idealism, the modern concept of immanence ‘has implied the capacity of “thought” to subsume being, by “dwelling within” being as an organizing or even creative function’, as opposed to ‘transcendent systems of thought’ which ‘posit that being in fact exceeds the synthetic capacities of consciousness, dogmatically assuming an object that stands over and against a knowing subject’.<sup>57</sup>

### 1.5 Labriola’s immanence

The distinctive character of Labriola’s theoretical interposition or, more precisely, the fundamental schism it signifies in relation to prior concepts of immanence should now be apparent. Labriola retains the notion of the unity of being and thought, object and subject of knowledge, but one conceived in terms of the non-metaphysical immanence of human thought in concrete historical, social, and practical life, rather than a unity founded on the immanence of God, an absolute substance, or some other metaphysical absolute in its effects, or that of a subject’s self-consciousness in a reality or being which it itself has ideally constituted. It is in terms of this understanding of the being-thought nexus, in contradistinction to that in Hegel and the other prior metaphysical idealist conceptions, that Labriola’s concept of immanence, and therefore, his elaboration of Marx’s theory as a philosophy of praxis, can be comprehended. According to this perspective, theory can no longer be understood as transcendent or external to the social practices it seeks to comprehend. Rather, theory is immanent in the social practices from which it emerges, and which it seeks to comprehend. As a consequence, theories and ideas must be understood concretely as the various forms and modalities through which our historical, social, and practical life activities are comprehended “from within”, that is, necessarily within a historically specific set of social and practical relations, and in fact, from particular perspectives overdetermined by the specific social and practical position which we occupy within it. For Labriola, the processes of thinking and acquiring new knowledge are, themselves, practical activities that develop historically in conjunction with material, social, and economic development. But these can only occur ‘by virtue of our own powers, *in our social group and from the point of view which we occupy in it*’.<sup>58</sup> As Labriola had argued, in an earlier attempt at formulating the concept of immanence,

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<sup>57</sup> Thomas 2010, 322.

<sup>58</sup> Labriola 1912, 46-7 (my italics).

It is in this passage from the criticism of subjective thought, which examines things outside and imagines it can correct them at once, to the understanding of the self-criticism exercised by society over itself in the immanence of its own processes – it is in this only that the dialectic of history consists, which Marx and Engels, in so far as they were materialists, drew from the idealism of Hegel.<sup>59</sup>

The reality we seek to comprehend, is *our* reality, that is, a reality necessarily *for us*, not in any Fichtean or other idealist sense in which our thought reflects being because the former is ultimately reflecting itself, but in the much more concrete sense that human thought must seek to comprehend its own historically determinate, material, social, and practical conditions, rather than an otherworldly or transcendent realm of being and reality “beyond”, or outside of, the framework of human historical, social, and practical life.

Marx’s theory of historical materialism bears within it, this non-metaphysical and anti-speculative understanding of all thought in its concrete historical, social, and practical overdeterminations. It is that genuine intellectual revolution according to which ‘Ideas do not fall from heaven’, but find their basis in material, social and practical life, and this, because it has succeeded in grasping “the nature of man” as itself, ‘a historical making’, a social and ‘practical process’. It thus ‘regards the philosophical mind itself as a product of history’.<sup>60</sup> Within this conception, Marx’s theory of historical materialism, as a philosophy of praxis, is distinguished precisely by the fact that it is a theory that consciously and critically recognizes its own historicity, i.e. its own concrete foundation in the historical, material, social, and political practices that form its basis and which it strives to comprehend in order to transform.<sup>61</sup> In this sense, it is a philosophy immanent, rather than transcendent, to that about which it philosophizes. ‘Not from thought to life’, but rather, ‘from life to thought’ is the realistic process, and Marxism is precisely that philosophy of praxis, of human life in its concrete historical, social, and practical dimensions.<sup>62</sup> As Thomas contends, Labriola is propounding that Marx’s theory of historical materialism is an “immanent philosophy” insofar as it is ‘a theory that does not set itself above that which it theorizes (transcendence of thought to being) but which acknowledges its “earthly” character. A dogmatic division between thought and being, subject and object, is dissolved by Labriola into a dialectical concept of *praxis*’.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Labriola 1908, 170.

<sup>60</sup> Labriola 1912, 43, 60.

<sup>61</sup> As Labriola stressed, Marx’s theory of historical materialism is, itself, the product of history, and therefore, like all thought, is subject to historical change, *ibid.* 42-3, 51, 65.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.* 60, 109.

<sup>63</sup> Thomas 2010, 342-3. As Labriola himself argued, in the category of *praxis*, there is ‘the elimination of the vulgar distinction between theory and practice’, Labriola 1912, 43.

As a consequence of the status of Marx's philosophy of praxis as a self-conscious mode of knowing and comprehending the antagonistic social world "from within" it, that is, immanently from a particular social and practical position, or as Labriola himself put it, 'in our social group and from the point of view which we occupy in it',<sup>64</sup> it is a philosophy that consciously identifies itself with and presupposes the particular standpoint, or *visual angle*, of the proletariat.<sup>65</sup> Marx (and Engels), he wrote, 'identified themselves with the cause of the proletariat, and they became inseparable from the conscience and science of the proletarian revolution'. Thus, far from assuming a transcendent and 'impartial judgment of the practical struggles of life', Marxism is precisely that conception of history 'from the point of view' of the proletariat and the proletarian revolution.<sup>66</sup> In short, Marx's historical materialism is construed as the theoretical form of comprehending the concrete historical and social world from the specific standpoint of the needs and interests of the proletariat, and is therefore, literally, a "philosophy of praxis" immanent to the object or reality it seeks to comprehend - i.e. that of the proletariat, its practical life conditions within society, and the historically vital needs and interests deriving out of these conditions.

It is on the basis of this understanding of Marx's thought as an immanent philosophy of praxis, that it supersedes traditional philosophical thought, in particular the old forms of idealism and materialism. On one hand, it represents a fundamental rupture with speculative idealist metaphysics, i.e. with 'all forms of idealism which regard actually existing things as mere reflexes, reproductions, imitations, illustrations, results, of so-called *a priori* thought'. By re-conceptualizing the unity of thought and being, subject and object, in terms of the concrete, immanent unity of thought with human historical, material, and social practices, it qualitatively distances itself from the speculative metaphysical identification of thought and reality characteristic of traditional idealist philosophies of immanence, particularly Hegel's speculative identification of the rational and real, of 'the spontaneous generation of thought' in the metaphysical form of *The Idea Itself*'.<sup>67</sup> On the other hand, Labriola contended against the so-called "verbalists", concerned with 'the value of the word *matter* in so far as it implies or recalls a metaphysical conception, or in so far as it is the expression of the last hypothetical substratum of experience'.<sup>68</sup> As he posits elsewhere, 'With us it is not a question of relying on . . . metaphysical knowledge of the universe, on the assumption that we had arrived without further ceremony at a comprehensive view of the basic substance of all phenomena and processes by an act of transcendental

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<sup>64</sup> Labriola 1912, 46-7 (my italics).

<sup>65</sup> Labriola in fact repeatedly stressed the partiality of Marx's philosophy as a conception of the world of the proletariat. Cf. Labriola 1912, 31, 40-1, 51, 75, 81. On this point, see Frosini 2004b, 3-4.

<sup>66</sup> Labriola 1912, 31, 201.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. 60.

<sup>68</sup> Labriola 1908, 98.

cognition'.<sup>69</sup> The metaphysical essentialism, or ontological hypostatization of “matter” as the fundamental substance and basic principle of all reality characteristic of the materialist philosophical tradition, is incompatible with the conception of Marx’s thought as a philosophy immanent, rather than transcendent, to the concrete historical, social, and practical terrain that constitutes its conditions of emergence and which it seeks grasp from a particular standpoint within it. There is, in other words, no “outside”, no transcendent Archimedean point from which to grasp the fundamental nature and structure of all reality,<sup>70</sup> because thought and knowledge are historical, social, and practical relations. In place of a metaphysics of matter, ‘the philosophy, which historical materialism implies’ “corrects” this materialist monism by taking as its point of departure, practice, i.e. ‘the development of the labor-process’, and the historical and social forms in which this occurs.<sup>71</sup> The material world is actively shaped and transform under the guidance of conscious human labor. The things found in physical nature ‘cease to be mere rigid objects of vision’, and in this sense, have become “historicized”.<sup>72</sup> As such, historical materialism is also not concerned with “materialism” as it is conceived in the ‘the domain of physics, chemistry or biology; we are only searching for the explicit conditions of human association in so far as it is no longer simply animal’, in other words, ‘the peculiarities of human association, which form and develop through the succession and the growing perfection of the activity of man himself in given and variable conditions, and to find the relations of co-ordination and subordination of the needs which are the substratum of will and action.’<sup>73</sup> In short, Labriola comprehends the category of “materialism” in Marx’s historical materialism, not in the traditional philosophical or metaphysical sense, nor in the positivist sense of the natural sciences, but instead in terms of the historically changing social forms and relations within which the natural world is actively appropriated and consciously transformed by human labor and the production process in order to fulfill practical material needs and interests.

Thus, it is the “earthly” character of Marx’s thought as a philosophy of praxis concretely immanent, rather than transcendent, to the historical, material, and social practices from which it emerges, which it strives to comprehend, and to whose transformation it seeks to contribute, that the alternative, non-metaphysical category of immanence signifies, the purported fruit of Marx’s critical reversal of Hegel’s speculative conception of immanence in the dialectical identity of being and thought, implicitly embedded within the theory of historical materialism, and which signals a fundamental rupture with traditional philosophical conceptions of idealism and materialism. Conscious human labor, i.e. concrete praxis, along with the historically variable social forms in which labor and the material production

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<sup>69</sup> Labriola 1912, 84.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. 67, 86-7, 89-90.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. 84-5, 43.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. 65.

<sup>73</sup> Labriola 1908, 98-9.

process is organized, rather than the purely speculative, metaphysical activity of thought or some mental substance, furnishes the framework within which being and thought, object and subject, are dialectically conjoined and synthesized. It is therefore, this non-metaphysical, non-idealist concept of immanence which lies at the basis of, and accounts for, the philosophical originality, novelty, and specificity of Marx's thought as a philosophy of praxis.

### 1.6 Gramsci and Labriola

The above analysis of Labriola serves to clarify and render more transparent the exigency, posed by Gramsci in Notebook 4, of 'resuming and developing Labriola's position', putting his work back into circulation and making his philosophical position the pre-eminent one. For it was Labriola who had contended that the essential nucleus of Marx's theory of historical materialism resided in a distinctive philosophical conception that qualitatively distanced itself from prior philosophy, in particular idealism and materialism. Furthermore, despite the curious fact, noted by Thomas, of Gramsci's puzzling failure to 'explicitly refer to Labriola's contributions in his discussion of Marx's new concept of immanence',<sup>74</sup> it is precisely in the note, previously cited at the beginning of this chapter, in which Gramsci asserted that the quintessence of Marxism hinged on its supersession of previous forms of philosophical materialism and idealism, the consequence of which was a new philosophical construction, that he also claimed that out of all the sources of 'Marx's philosophical work',

Hegelianism is, relatively speaking, the most important, especially because of its effort to go beyond the traditional conceptions of "idealism" and "materialism". When one says that Marx uses the term "immanence" in a metaphoric sense, one is saying nothing; in reality, Marx attached a specific meaning to the term "immanence" – in other words, he is not a "pantheist" in the traditional metaphysical sense; rather he is a "Marxist" or a "historical materialist".<sup>75</sup>

This position is reaffirmed just six notes later, Gramsci averring again that 'The term "immanence" in Marx has a precise meaning . . . Marx continues the philosophy of immanence, but he rids it of its whole metaphysical apparatus and brings it to the concrete terrain of history'.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Thomas 2010, 341-2.

<sup>75</sup> Q 4, 11, 433.

<sup>76</sup> Q 4, 17, 438.

Hence, Gramsci's simultaneous assertion of Labriola's philosophical importance together with his emphasis on the centrality, in Marx, of an alternative, non-metaphysical concept of immanence is not at all accidental, but instead, has a real basis in Labriola's earlier theoretical formulations. As others have noted, immanence was not a key category in the Marxist theoretical tradition in which Gramsci's thought developed. Marx did not, despite Gramsci's claims to the contrary, explicitly develop a notion of immanence out of his critique of Hegel. Neither was it a vital concept in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Internationals, nor even in the philosophically orientated so-called "Western Marxists", such as Korsch and Lukács.<sup>77</sup> Rather, as we have seen, immanence was essentially a product of the idealist philosophical traditions in Western thought, and in fact, as will become evident, it was a crucial category in the Italian neo-Hegelian idealist culture in which the young Gramsci's thought was formed, particularly in the philosophical thought of its leading figures, Gentile and Croce. It was without doubt, these thinkers whom Gramsci had in mind and intended to counter when he argued that Marx continued the philosophy of immanence (i.e. his thought did not fall back into a transcendent metaphysical dualism), but did so in a resolutely non-metaphysical, concrete, and historical way. It is however, only in Labriola that Gramsci would have discovered the seeds, within the Marxist tradition, for a non-idealist conception of immanence purportedly at the base of Marx's philosophical thought.

### 1.7 Gentile's Marx

This is evident in Gramsci's earliest suggestion (Autumn 1930) of a potential reworking of historical materialism along the lines of a philosophy of praxis:

neither idealistic nor materialistic "monism", neither "Matter" nor "Spirit", but rather "*historical materialism*", that is to say, concrete human activity (history): namely activity concerning a certain organized "matter" (material forces of production) and the "nature" transformed by man'. Philosophy of the act (praxis), not of the "pure act" but rather of the "impure" – that is, the real – act, in the profane sense of the word.<sup>78</sup>

Here, Gramsci is in fact placing himself in sharp confrontation with Gentile on two distinct, yet interconnected levels, one explicit, the other implicit. At the level of the latter, Gramsci is tacitly challenging Gentile's earlier instrumentalized reading and misinterpretation of Marx, specifically the

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<sup>77</sup> Thomas 2010, 341-2, Frosini 2004b, 2-3.

<sup>78</sup> Q 4, 37, 455.



*Theses*, the edited Engelsian version of which he was the first to translate into Italian in 1899. Contrary to Croce, who denied the philosophical status of historical materialism, reducing it to an empirical method of historical research, Gentile concurred with Labriola that there was a philosophy contained in Marx's theory and, following Engels' own indications, placed the *Theses* at the base of Marx's philosophical thought, i.e. the so-called "philosophy of praxis", inheriting Labriola's phrase.<sup>79</sup> But Gentile did so only in order to demonstrate its fundamental theoretical incoherence, in this way directly contesting Labriola's thesis that Marx's philosophy was genuinely immanent.

According to Gentile's idealist misinterpretation,<sup>80</sup> Marx correctly criticized the materialist philosophical tradition for its abstract conception of the gnoseological relation between object and subject, in which the object of sensible intuition was conceived as a fixed external datum, constituted in itself without reference to the activity of a subject. Consequently, the philosophical materialists erroneously viewed the subject as a passive mirror of the object, a *tabula rasa* or mere receptacle for the images impressed upon it by the objective external world. In place of this materialist objectivism, Marx recognized that object and subject can only exist in a necessary, dynamic relation with one another as a result of the self-positing praxis of the subject. As the idealist philosophical tradition had long argued, it is the intellectual, i.e. *spiritual* activity or praxis of the subject that *creates* the object. To think an object, is tantamount to its ideal construction. Thus, there is a complete identity of subject and object, thinking and making, knowledge and praxis: in the thinking activity of the subject, the object is simultaneously made, and therefore, known, and vice versa, in knowing, there is simultaneously the practical creation of the object. Drawing on his earlier idealist philosophical formation, Marx grasped, in contrast to the philosophical materialists, that knowledge is a practical act in perpetual movement and development, the result of the self-positing activity of the subject, in which the latter can only be what it is by positing itself as an object.<sup>81</sup>

However, Marx's philosophical blunder, Gentile argued, lay in his contradictory attempt to inherit this idea of praxis in the conceptual form in which it had been developed by philosophical idealism, while at the same time trying to give it a materialist content, i.e. precisely in Marx's claim to have developed a concept of *sensuous* praxis applied to material objects, in place of the purely speculative activity of thought put forth by philosophical idealism. For Gentile, the category of "matter" in

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<sup>79</sup> Gentile 2014, 110, 113.

<sup>80</sup> A misinterpretation aided by a mistranslation of some parts of the *Theses*. Cf. the first thesis, in which (in Engels's edited version), 'thing [*Gegenstand*]', was replaced with 'the term of thought', *ibid.* 116. Similarly, Marx's 'objective [*gegenständliche*] activity', was explained as activity that creates or produces the sensible object, *ibid.* 121.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.* 126-9.

philosophical materialism is, by definition, undialectical, static, and inert. Given this understanding of matter, he could argue that only a concept of praxis, understood in spiritual and ideal terms as that of thought could be the legitimate source of the perpetual historical movement that characterizes reality.<sup>82</sup> It follows that Marx's attempt to correct metaphysical materialism by re-conceptualizing matter in dynamic movement as a result of subjective human praxis, and thus, to move from a static metaphysics of matter to a *historical* materialism, is utterly incoherent, and the very notion of a "historical materialism", an oxymoron.<sup>83</sup> Gentile thus argued that Marx's philosophy of praxis was traversed by an insurmountable internal contradiction between form (praxis) and content (matter), the concept of praxis as developed by philosophical idealism and the attempt to apply this to sensuous reality. Far from being an immanent philosophy, Gentile concluded that Marx's philosophical construction, the true character of which was contained in the *Theses*, relapsed into a platonic, transcendent metaphysical dualism between thought and reality, the spiritual activity or praxis of the subject and material reality, the subject and object of knowledge, idealism and materialism.<sup>84</sup>

Gentile's reading of the *Theses* served as the basis for the later elaboration of his own idealist philosophy of spirit as "the pure act", as the only coherent solution to the dyadic metaphysical opposition between being and thought, object and subject, and in which the activity of thought itself is constitutive of the objects of human experience and hence, reality, thus forming the foundation of objective truth and knowledge. The metaphysics of transcendence was therefore, purportedly overcome in his "actual idealism", a veritable absolute immanence securing the unity of reality and thought, in which theory and practice were united since practice or activity was precisely that of thought. Thinking and knowing about the world, reality, or objectivity was simultaneously to make and constitute it,<sup>85</sup> a conception reminiscent of traditional, post-Kantian metaphysical idealist notions of immanence, particularly Fichte's subjective idealism, in which, as Thomas aptly describes it, thoughts are immanent in the world of objects 'because, in truth, they were already present in them, as their originary ground and finally revealed truth: a classic idealist proposition in which thought is "immanent" to – dwelling or remaining within . . . being . . . thought could reflect reality because it was in truth reflecting itself.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid. 225, 232.

<sup>83</sup> For Gentile, matter in historical movement would cease to be matter, Ibid. 229.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid. 120, 223, 225, 229, 231-3. Thus, Gentile understood Marx's eleventh thesis as a demand for philosophers, by purely intellectual and spiritual means to transform a material world with which this spiritual and philosophical praxis was fundamentally incompatible, Ibid. 231.

<sup>85</sup> Gentile 1987, 14-21, Gentile 1923, 31-71, 246-7. This idea was obviously already tacitly presupposed in his earlier critique of Marx, providing Gentile with the opportunity to plant the seeds for his later, mature philosophy, cf. Salina, Introduction to Gentile 2014, 5, and Frosini 2004a, 98.

<sup>86</sup> Thomas 2010, 344.

### 1.8 A philosophy of the act (praxis) in the profane sense

In effect, Gramsci is conducting a belated intervention into a crucial debate that took place in Italy at the turn of the century over how to understand Marx, taking the side of Labriola against Gentile, the former's interpretation of Marx's thought as a philosophy of praxis against the latter's dualistic, speculative idealist misinterpretation, especially of the *Theses*, which Gentile exploited as the central text in order to philosophically decapitate Marxism.<sup>87</sup> Understood from this perspective, it becomes clear that Gramsci's sudden interest in the *Theses*, as well as his attempt to go back to Engels's original version in order to extract his own translation, had a precise strategic function and significance, namely, that of confuting Gentile's re-reading in order to demonstrate that it is in reality, 'Labriola's philosophical views', i.e. 'his formulation of the philosophical question' which needs to be resumed and developed, and ultimately, 'should be made to prevail',<sup>88</sup> and on the basis of which Gramsci could critically intervene in the contemporary debates over the philosophical status of Marxism, uprooting the double revision into which the Marxism of his time had been subjected, between a traditional metaphysical and philosophical materialism, on one hand, and its syncretic fusion with idealist philosophical currents on the other.<sup>89</sup>

Indeed, Marx's thought could be considered a philosophy of the act (praxis), but not at all in Gentile's sense as a hopelessly futile and contradictory attempt to synthesize subjective praxis, thinkable only within the terms of spiritual and intellectual activity, with a material reality, conceivable only in traditional philosophical terms as a static, ahistorical metaphysics of matter. On the contrary, the 'theses on Feuerbach' demonstrate how 'Marx had gone beyond the philosophical position of vulgar materialism'.<sup>90</sup> If, as Gramsci contends, 'Idealism hypostatizes this "something"; it makes it into an entity unto itself, the spirit, just as religion had done with divinity . . . if what religion and idealism produce is a "hypostasis" – that is, an arbitrary abstraction . . . then the "deification" of matter, etc., by vulgar

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<sup>87</sup> On this Italian debate over Marx, see De Giovanni 1983, 3-25.

<sup>88</sup> Q 3, 31, 309, Q 4, 3, 422. Gramsci would have also been reminded of this debate between Labriola and Gentile over Marx's philosophy of praxis by Croce's direct reference to it in *Materialismo Storico ed Economia Marxista*, a text which Gramsci had with him from the beginning of his stay in Turi, and in which Croce explicitly referred to the *Theses*, Labriola's *Socialism and Philosophy*, and Gentile's *La Filosofia di Marx*, Croce 1900, 153. Later on in the Notebooks, Gramsci will explicitly reference these statements by Croce, and in a highly significant context, as we will see.

<sup>89</sup> Q 3, 31, 308-9.

<sup>90</sup> Q 5, 39, 572, written just after Q 4, 37.

materialism is also a “hypostasis””.<sup>91</sup> Historical materialism does not repudiate the transcendent metaphysical hypostatization of an abstract spirit characteristic of philosophical idealism, only in order to posit, in its stead, an equally abstract and transcendent, metaphysical hypostatization of “matter” as the fundamental substance constitutive of all reality. Disputing Bukharin<sup>92</sup> (and implicitly also Gentile), Gramsci argues that

in historical materialism, “matter” should be understood neither in the meaning it has derived from the natural sciences . . . nor in the meaning it has derived from the various materialist metaphysics. Historical materialism takes the physical (chemical, mechanical, etc.) properties of matter into account, of course, but only insofar as they become an “economic factor” of production. The issue, then, is not matter as such but how it is socially and historically organized for production, as a *human relation*.<sup>93</sup>

Marx’s theory cannot be ‘confused with vulgar materialism or with the metaphysics of “matter” which is bound to be eternal and absolute’.<sup>94</sup> For Marx had already criticized, in the first thesis on Feuerbach, the prior materialist philosophical tradition for its abstract, static, and ahistorical conception of material reality in purely objective terms, without reference to a subject, i.e. ‘human sensible activity’ or ‘praxis’ that actively transforms it.<sup>95</sup> Rather, Marx’s thought is quite literally a “*historical materialism*”, that is, a conception of the natural material world insofar as it is historically and socially transformed by means of concrete human labor and the production process, ‘as a *human relation*’, or to the extent that it becomes ‘an “economic factor” of production’, incorporated in a historically determinate set of social and class relations.<sup>96</sup> In other words, as Labriola had already argued, the category of “materialism” in Marx’s historical materialism is comprehensible, not as a transcendent metaphysical or ontological hypostatization, nor in the sense of the natural sciences, but instead in terms of the historically changing

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<sup>91</sup> Q 4, 32, 451.

<sup>92</sup> The need to confront Bukharin’s theoretical positions was one of Gramsci’s central preoccupations in the *Notebooks*. Bukharin’s text, *Historical Materialism: A System of Sociology* (which Gramsci commonly referred to as the “Popular Manual”) and the philosophical perspectives contained in it, enjoyed an immense popularity in the Soviet Union and the international communist movement following its publication in 1921. In the book, Bukharin elaborated a deterministic conception of historical materialism, the philosophical foundation of which lay in a traditional metaphysical materialism, Bukharin 1925, 53-83. Gramsci ruthlessly reprimanded, among other things, Bukharin’s philosophical transformation of Marxism into an ahistorical and transcendent metaphysics of matter. Cf. Q 4, 40, 465, Q 4, 25, 443-5.

<sup>93</sup> Q 4, 25, 443-4.

<sup>94</sup> Q 4, 40, 466.

<sup>95</sup> Q 2355. Notice here that Gramsci correctly translated *Gegenstand* as ‘the object’, in contrast to Gentile’s idealistic reduction of it to a ‘term of thought’, Gentile 2014, 116. Nor, in Gramsci’s translation of the *Theses*, do we find anything even remotely resembling Gentile’s idealist explication of ‘objective [*gegenständliche*] activity’, as activity that creates or produces the sensible object, *ibid.* 121. See Q 2355-7.

<sup>96</sup> Q 4, 25, 444.

social forms and relations within which the natural sensuous world is actively appropriated and transformed by human praxis, i.e. labor and the production process, in order to fulfill practical material needs and interests. Hence, contra Gentile, this historical, social, and practical transformation of physical nature is not at all a purely subjective, spiritual or mental praxis applied to a transcendent “matter”, but rather, the historical process grasped as ‘concrete human activity’, ‘that is, the real act, in the profane sense of the word’. It is human practical activity, i.e. work and labor, that constitutes ‘the dialectical mediation’, in other words, the ‘active union between man and nature’,<sup>97</sup> and on the basis of which the ‘dualism between man and nature’ can be rejected.<sup>98</sup>

Thus, we can understand now the full significance of Gramsci’s conception of Marx’s thought as neither idealistic nor materialistic “monism”, neither “Matter” nor “Spirit”, but rather “*historical materialism*”, that is to say, concrete human activity (history): namely activity concerning a certain organized “matter” (material forces of production) and the “nature” transformed by man’. Philosophy of the act (praxis), not of the “pure act” but rather of the “impure” – that is, the real – act, in the profane sense of the word.<sup>99</sup>

Gramsci is affirming exactly what Gentile had denied; instead of being the source of an insurmountable contradiction between “form” and “content”, spiritual praxis and matter, subject and object, thought and being, and thus, of the collapse of Marx’s philosophy into a platonic metaphysical dualism, the category of praxis sketched in the *Theses* is, conversely, precisely the theoretical basis on which these various dualisms are overcome in a non-speculative way, hence, the basis for the status of Marx’s thought as a philosophy of praxis genuinely immanent in the non-metaphysical, non-idealist sense. Rather than a contradictory attempt to unite subjective spiritual and intellectual practice with a metaphysical materialism, transcendent, ahistorical, and dualistic by definition, i.e. the classic philosophical dualism between thought and being, idealism and materialism, the subject and object of knowledge into which Marx’s philosophical thought allegedly degenerated, Gramsci avers, in diametric opposition to Gentile, that Marx’s theory is a “*historical materialism*” which, far from being a contradiction in terms, theorizes the active historical, social, and practical relations between human beings and the material world in terms of the concept of ‘sensible human activity, praxis’, sketched in the *Theses*,<sup>100</sup> i.e. ‘concrete human activity (history)’, bound up therefore with a historically and socially transformed material world. Neither a transcendent metaphysics of “matter”, nor the transcendence of an

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<sup>97</sup> Q 4, 47, 473.

<sup>98</sup> Q 4, 43, 469.

<sup>99</sup> Q 4, 37, 455.

<sup>100</sup> Q 2355.

ideal spirit, reality has been redefined in non-metaphysical, historicist terms within the framework of human praxis, as the historically variable social relations in which human beings organize labor and the production process, actively transforming nature in order to meet needs. Consequently, human thought only arises on the terrain, and within the framework, of human historical, social, and practical development. As Gramsci asserts, ‘In historical materialism thought cannot be separated from being, man from nature, activity (history) from matter, subject from object: such a separation would be a fall into empty talk, meaningless abstraction’.<sup>101</sup>

In other words, Marx’s conception is not a theory transcendent to the reality it seeks to grasp, not a purely subjective thought that attempts to know an otherworldly or transcendent reality (the mutual or reciprocal transcendence of thought to being, subject and object), or in Labriola’s words, not ‘the criticism of subjective thought, which examines things outside’, but is rather, a theory that seeks to grasp the real historical, social, and practical process of development of human beings from a position “within” it, since as a theory, it must consciously and critically recognize itself as *part* of the historical, social, and practical world it strives to understand. Thus, like Labriola, Gramsci emphasizes the unavoidable historicity of historical materialism itself: ‘As a philosophy, historical materialism asserts theoretically that every “truth” thought to be eternal and absolute has practical origins and has represented or represents a provisional value’, and it is essential ‘to interpret historical materialism itself in this light’.<sup>102</sup> Marx’s thought represents a form of theorizing and knowing as a historical, social, and practical relation, as part of the historical process itself. It is, as Labriola indicated, a philosophy of praxis immanent in the concrete world about which it philosophizes, to human practical life in its infinite variety and complexity. Or, in Gramsci’s words, it is a ‘Philosophy of the act (praxis), not of the “pure act” but rather of the “impure” – that is, the real – act, in the profane sense of the word’, hence a philosophy immanent in the concrete, non-speculative sense to the historical, material, and social practices from which it emerges, and which it seeks to comprehend. From “life to thought, not from thought to life”, the division between being and thought, the object and subject of knowledge, is overcome on the basis of praxis, understood in the real, “impure”, or *profane* sense, the concrete immanent dialectical unity of thought and practice.

Thus, contrary to Gentile, not only does Marx’s philosophical thought in the *Theses* continue modern philosophies of immanence by transcending the various philosophical dualisms. Much more significantly, it has succeeded in doing so through a fundamental displacement of the traditional concept, purifying it of ‘its whole metaphysical apparatus’, and relocating it in ‘the concrete terrain of history’.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Q 4, 41, 467.

<sup>102</sup> Q 4, 40, 465.

<sup>103</sup> Q 4, 17, 438.

Marx ‘is not a “pantheist” in the traditional metaphysical sense; rather he is a “Marxist” or a “historical materialist”’.<sup>104</sup> He superseded the vulgar opposition between ‘the two moments of philosophical life’, materialism and idealism, in a new dialectical synthesis, ‘just as Hegel had tried to do and as Marx really did’. This new philosophical construction ‘is already clearly evident in the theses of Feuerbach’.<sup>105</sup> Not only has Gramsci undermined Gentile’s dualistic and “spiritualized” interpretation of the *Theses*. He has also undercut the latter’s proposed “solution” to Marx’s alleged dualism, namely, his idealist philosophy of spirit as the “pure act” as purportedly the only true absolute immanence, but in reality, a merely speculative identification of thought and being, subject and object, theory and practice, knowledge and action, through the purely intellectual and spiritual “activity” of the subject positing itself in the form of an object. Contrary to the “method of immanence” in Gentile’s “actual idealism”, Marx’s theory does not think ‘the absolute concreteness of the real in the action of thought’.<sup>106</sup> Rather, it is a ‘Philosophy of the act (praxis), not of the “pure act” but rather of the “impure” – that is, the real – act, in the profane sense of the word’.

In short, for Gramsci, as for Labriola, the division between reality and consciousness, materialism and idealism, nature and human beings, the “object” and “subject” of knowledge, is dissolved within the framework of the concept of human praxis extracted from Marx’s *Theses*, and on the basis of which the immanentist status of human thought, in the “earthly”, “worldly”, and “secular” sense is derived. In a later phase of his prison research, Gramsci will, much more explicitly, draw out these connections between Marx’s *Theses*, and the necessity, following Labriola’s own indications, of re-elaborating them as a philosophy of praxis in connection with a new, non-metaphysical concept of immanence.<sup>107</sup> For now, however, remaining at the level of 1930, we can say that Gramsci’s initial “return to Marx” in Notebook 4 finds its underlying coherence and fundamental point of orientation in Labriola’s framework of historical materialism as a philosophy of praxis, and in which, as Frosini argues, Labriola’s sketch of a non-metaphysical conception of immanence as the concreteness, or “earthly” status, of human thought, together with a non-idealist concept of praxis, understood as human labor, work, and production are decisive, paving the way for an understanding of the concrete ‘unity of subject and object, and therefore a theoretical space departing from which the same problem of the dualism of consciousness and the world loses meaning’, and with it, the metaphysical dualism between materialism and idealism.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Q 4, 11, 433.

<sup>105</sup> Q 4, 3, 424.

<sup>106</sup> Gentile 1923, 246-7.

<sup>107</sup> Q 10, II, 31, 1270-1.

<sup>108</sup> Frosini 2001, 43-5.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Truth, ideology, and the early emergence of the philosophy of praxis**

#### **2.1 From Labriola to the primacy of politics**

The previous chapter attempted to demonstrate how Gramsci's initial return to Marx found its basic point of orientation in Labriola's sketch of a non-metaphysical concept of immanence. The dualism between thought and reality was rejecting on the basis of a non-idealist conception of praxis, in which all thought was concretely grounded in a historically determinate ensemble of material, social, and practical relations. The notion of the unity of being and thought, object and subject of knowledge was retained, but one conceived in terms of the non-metaphysical immanence of human thought in historical, social, and practical life. Human thought is no longer to be understood as transcendent or external to praxis, but rather, immanent in the historical, material, and social practices that constitutes its foundation. As a consequence, ideas must be understood as the various forms through which our historical, social, and practical life activities are comprehended "from within", that is, necessarily within a historically specific set of social and practical relations, and from the particular standpoint of the practical position which we occupy within it. Within this prism, Marx's thought, as a philosophy of the act (praxis) in the "impure" and profane sense, is a theory that consciously and critically recognizes its own concrete foundation in the historical, material, social, and political practices that form its basis and which it strives to comprehend in order to transform. In this sense, it is implicitly a philosophy immanent, rather than transcendent, to that about which it philosophizes.

This chapter seeks to interrogate the way in which Gramsci immediately translates this Labriolan framework into the terms of politics. Through a convergence of Marxian texts orbiting principally around the *Theses*, particularly the sixth and fourth, the ensemble of social and practical relations that constitute the "earthly" foundation of all thought is grasped as a political terrain of struggle and class contradictions rooted in the economic structure of production. This political ontology of the social body, which finds its locus in the relations of social and political forces, forms the basic theoretical framework for the radical displacement of the traditional concepts of truth and knowledge onto the terrain of politics. Through a peculiar re-reading of Marx's 1859 Preface on the basis of the second



thesis on Feuerbach, the entire terrain of thought and knowledge is re-conceptualized as political, and therefore, ideological. Marx's second thesis becomes, in Gramsci's re-reading, the theoretical nucleus for the identification of truth and knowledge with their varying degrees of practical power and efficacy on the ideological terrain of political struggle.

This represents the distinctive and original framework within which Gramsci begins to pursue a fundamental redefinition of the whole of philosophy itself, including the philosophical specificity of Marxism, within the terms of hegemony. The "earthly" or immanent basis of all thought in social practices emphasized by Labriola becomes, in Gramsci's reformulation, the perspective according to which to grasp all thought, and therefore, philosophy, as practically, politically, and ideologically overdetermined, and thus, comprehensible in terms of their political and ideological effects on the terrain of struggle and conflict. Within this prism, the specificity of Marxism as a distinctive philosophy of praxis, as this begins to implicitly emerge, lies in its status as a self-conscious mode of interpreting and understanding the antagonistic social world "from within" it (immanently), that is, necessarily within the political field of social conflicts, and from a particular political and ideological standpoint assumed within it. In this way, Labriola's earlier stress on Marx's thought as an immanent form of philosophizing from the partial standpoint or visual angle of the proletariat, becomes the basis for Gramsci's own reformulation of Marxism as a philosophy of praxis.

I conclude by showing that the specific way in which Gramsci begins to grasp the immanent unity between theory and practice, philosophy and politics, pivots around the notion of "translatability" derived principally from Marx's *The Holy Family*, according to which all philosophy is implicitly politics, and vice versa, all politics is implicitly philosophy. The mutual or reciprocal immanence, or translatability, between theory and practice, philosophy and politics, is the distinctive manner in which Gramsci grasps all thought, and especially philosophy, in terms of its practical, political effects within the terms of hegemony.

## **2.2 Politics as a gnoseological principle**

Given the repudiation of philosophical idealism and materialism, understood as transcendent metaphysical and ontological hypostatizations, i.e. given that there is no longer any fundamental underlying substance constitutive of reality that can function as ontological guarantee or metaphysical

foundation for the truth-status of theories and propositions, how then to understand the concepts of truth and knowledge?

Not coincidentally, it is in the same note, Q 4, 37, discussed in the previous chapter, in which Gramsci rejected the traditional philosophical dualism between ontological materialism and idealism in favor of a concrete and historical conception of reality understood in relation to human material and social practices, and the concomitant conception of thought as historically circumscribed within determinate social and practical relations, that he also confronts the problem of knowledge, claiming that

When dealing with the question of the “objectivity” of knowledge from the point of view of historical materialism, the point of departure should be the affirmation . . . that “men become conscious (of this conflict) on the ideological level” of juridical, political, religious, artistic, or philosophical forms. But is this consciousness limited solely to the conflict between the material forces of production and the relations of production – as Marx’s text literally states – or does it apply to all consciousness, that is, all knowledge? This is the problem that can be worked out with the whole ensemble of the philosophical theory of the value of ideological superstructures.<sup>1</sup>

Here, Gramsci recalls Marx’s assertions in the 1859 Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, that

The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness . . . The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure. In studying such transformations it is always necessary to distinguish between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic – in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out.<sup>2</sup>

According to this passage, Marx understands ideologies within the superstructure as consisting in the multifarious forms of social consciousness through which people become conscious of “this conflict”, referring to ‘the material productive forces of society’ which ‘come into conflict with the existing relations of production’, and struggle for its resolution.<sup>3</sup> However, in contradistinction to this more restricted sense of ideology, Gramsci evidently widens the scope of its meaning in what Guido Liguori

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<sup>1</sup> Q 4, 37, 454-5.

<sup>2</sup> CW: 29: 263.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

appropriately calls a “dilated” re-reading of the 1859 Preface in which, as Gramsci suggests, *all* forms of human consciousness have an ideological, and hence, political status. This interpretation establishes ‘the possibility of a *positive* conception of ideology. Marxism, thus, becomes an ideology among the others, having as its aim or purpose making a class “become conscious”, in particular, the proletariat’.<sup>4</sup>

The seeds of this expanded understanding of ideology were already present in Q 4, 15, the first note in Notebook 4 that references the 1859 Preface, the principal Marxian text to which Gramsci explicitly refers in order to conceptualize ideology.<sup>5</sup> The immediate context of Gramsci’s concern to elaborate a notion of ideology was provided by an intense polemic with Croce. In his 1925 booklet, *Elementi di politica*, a copy of which Gramsci had in Rome prior to his arrest, Croce averred that Marx’s theory of historical materialism ‘viewed economic life as substantial and moral life as appearance, illusion, or what it called “superstructure”’.<sup>6</sup> He reiterated this claim in his intervention on aesthetics at the Seventh International Congress of Philosophy held at Oxford in 1930, arguing against Anatoly Lunacharsky that

Contrary to his belief that historical materialism is a rigorously antimetaphysical and totally realist conception, this theory is theological even more than it is metaphysical because it divides the oneness of the process of the real into structure and superstructure, noumenon and phenomenon, and for its basis it has, as a noumenon, a hidden God, the Economy, that pulls all the strings and is the only reality behind the appearances of morality, religion, philosophy, art, and so on.<sup>7</sup>

Gramsci appeals to Marx’s 1859 Preface in order to contest Croce’s contentions cited above, to which the former responds that

For Marx, “ideologies” are anything but appearances and illusions: they are an objective and operative reality; they just are not the mainspring of history, that’s all. It is not ideologies that create social reality, but social reality, in its productive structure, that creates ideologies. How could Marx have thought that superstructures are appearances and illusion? Even his theories are a superstructure. Marx explicitly states that humans become conscious of their tasks on the ideological terrain of the superstructures, which is hardly a minor affirmation of “reality”, and the aim of his theory is also, precisely, to make a specific social group “become conscious” of its

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<sup>4</sup> Liguori 2004, 133-4, 137.

<sup>5</sup> Received, along with Marx’s *Theses*, in the German anthology of Marxian texts, *Lohnarbeit und Kapital: Zur Judenfrage und andere Schriften aus der Fruhzeit*, sometime between March and November 1930.

<sup>6</sup> Croce 1925, 91-2.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted from Buttigieg’s “Notes” in Gramsci 2007, 493.

own tasks, its own power, its own coming-into-being. But he destroys the “ideologies” of the hostile social groups; those “ideologies” are in fact practical instruments of political domination over the rest of society, and Marx shows how they are meaningless because they are in contradiction with actual reality.<sup>8</sup>

In Gramsci’s view, Croce had partially absorbed the Marxist perspective on ideology, recognizing that ‘ideologies are practical constructs . . . instruments of political leadership’. Yet, despite this, Croce contradicts himself by arguing, at the same time, that historical materialism ‘viewed economic life as substantial and moral life as appearance, illusion, or what it called “superstructure”’.<sup>9</sup> If it is true that ideologies are practical constructs, elements of political leadership that form the terrain on which human beings, organized into opposing and antagonistic social groups, become conscious of their political tasks and power, then it cannot be the case that ideologies are mere appearances or illusions, i.e. passive reflections or epiphenomena of the economic structure, but instead constitute ‘an objective and operative reality’, notwithstanding the fact that they are not the “mainspring” of history but find their basis in the economic structure of production.

The above passage in fact contains subtle modifications to Marx’s own statements regarding ideology in the 1859 Preface:

1. Whereas Marx had said that ‘It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness’,<sup>10</sup> Gramsci wrote ‘It is not ideologies that create social reality, but social reality, in its productive structure, that creates ideologies’. Hence, whereas Marx spoke of consciousness, Gramsci speaks of “ideologies”.<sup>11</sup>
2. Gramsci appears to use “ideologies” and “superstructures” interchangeably, something he would increasingly do more clearly in later notebooks, saying that ‘For Marx, “ideologies” are anything but appearances and illusions’, and ‘How could Marx have thought that superstructures are appearances and illusion’. Indeed, as he would later write, ‘ideology in the sense used in the philosophy of praxis’, denotes ‘the whole ensemble of the superstructures’.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Q 4, 15, 436-7.

<sup>9</sup> Croce 1925, 91-2.

<sup>10</sup> CW: 29: 263.

<sup>11</sup> It is true that Gramsci correctly translated Marx’s phrase, using the term “consciousness” rather than “ideologies” in his translation of the Preface, Q 2358. This however, does not negate the fact that for Gramsci, the terrain of consciousness is equivalent to the ideological terrain, as is evident in Q 4, 37.

<sup>12</sup> Q 10II, 41i, 1299.

3. Gramsci repeatedly speaks in the plural of “superstructures”, whereas Marx employs the term only in the singular, speaking of ‘a legal and political superstructure’, and ‘the transformation of the whole immense superstructure’.<sup>13</sup>

4. He posits that even Marx’s theories are a superstructure, hence, an ideology - the form of representation appropriate to a specific social group’s (the proletariat) coming-to-consciousness of its tasks and powers on the political terrain.<sup>14</sup>

The above corroborates Liguori’s reading of Gramsci’s notion of ideology as a “dilated” one, according to which the entire terrain of human consciousness belongs to the space of ideology, and therefore of politics, ideologies being understood as the various practical and theoretical constructs (“superstructures” or “ideological forms”), through which human beings, organized into antagonistic social groups, become conscious of their political tasks and capabilities and struggle to fulfill them. Thus, Marx’s theory is also an ideology or superstructure, the aim of which consists in the development of working class consciousness.

Even more significantly (and again in contrast to Marx), Gramsci explicitly attributes a gnoseological validity to the ideological terrain: ‘Marx’s assertion - that men become conscious of economic conflicts on the terrain of ideology - has a gnoseological and not psychological or moral value’.<sup>15</sup> This reformulation is what Frosini refers to as “a theory of the gnoseological validity of the superstructures”, or ideologies, a “betrayal” in which Gramsci “explicitly tampers” with Marx’s own statements in the Preface.<sup>16</sup> The question of human knowledge and its nature is comprehensible only within the terms of ideology, with the consequence that even science is considered to be a superstructure or ideology.<sup>17</sup> In Q 4, 37, as Frosini points out, ‘Gramsci is reading the Preface on the basis of the *Theses on Feuerbach*, the concept of *ideology* on the basis of the reformulation of the question of *truth* in terms of *praxis*’.<sup>18</sup> Speaking of the ‘the question of the “objectivity” of knowledge from the point of view of

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<sup>13</sup> CW: 29: 263. Although in the Notebooks, Gramsci speaks both of “superstructure” and “superstructures”, usage in the latter, pluralized form predominates. See Liguori and Voza (eds.) 2009, 830-34. Given his understanding of the superstructure in terms of the “ideological forms” of which Marx spoke, whose content is plural, Gramsci was probably led to pluralize the concept - “superstructures”, used interchangeably as a synonym for “ideologies”, i.e. “ideological forms”.

<sup>14</sup> Similar formulations can be found in Gramsci’s youthful writings. He spoke, for example, of President Wilson and the Russian maximalists as representative, respectively, of “bourgeois and proletarian ideologies”, Gramsci 1982, 691. Elsewhere, he claimed that while Marx criticized bourgeois ideologies, Marx himself was also an ideologist insofar as he was a revolutionary, and an active man of politics, Gramsci 1984, 17.

<sup>15</sup> Q 4, 38, 464-5.

<sup>16</sup> Frosini 2009, 33-4.

<sup>17</sup> Q 4, 7, 430.

<sup>18</sup> Frosini 2009, 34.

historical materialism', Gramsci's reference point was clearly Marx's second thesis on Feuerbach, in which the latter claimed that 'The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question. Man must prove the truth, i.e. the reality and power, the this-worldliness [*Diesseitigkeit*] of his thinking in practice'.<sup>19</sup> This is further corroborated by the language employed in the immediately following note in which, referencing the 1859 Preface, Gramsci had written that the social and political forces struggling to supersede a structure wracked by crises and contradictions, seek 'to demonstrate (in the final analysis through their own triumph)' by various ideological means the necessity for its historical supersession.<sup>20</sup> This usage of the word "demonstrate" corresponds exactly to Gramsci's translation of the second thesis at the beginning of Notebook 7, in which Marx's phrase "must prove" (in Engels's edited version) was rendered as "deve dimostrare".<sup>21</sup>

Marx's second thesis becomes, in Gramsci's re-reading, the theoretical nucleus for a reconstitution of the traditional categories of truth, knowledge, and objectivity *within* the space of ideology; the entire terrain of human consciousness and knowledge is necessarily practically, politically, and ideologically overdetermined, with the consequence that there is no longer any fundamental, qualitative distinction between truth and falsity, ideological and non-ideological (or scientific), but rather, quantitative distinctions between different modes of consciousness according to their varying degrees of practical political power (truth) *within* the ideological terrain. Truth and knowledge are identified with their varying degrees of practical efficacy on the ideological terrain of political struggle, and in the last analysis, with hegemony, since the gnoseological value of ideology means that hegemony too is gnoseological:

In view of what was stated above - namely, that the value of Marx's assertion - that men become conscious of economic conflicts on the terrain of ideology - is gnoseological and not psychological or moral, it follows that the value of the concept of hegemony, too, is gnoseological. This concept, then, should be regarded as Ilyich's greatest contribution to Marxist philosophy, to historical materialism: an original and creative contribution. In this respect, Ilyich advanced Marxism not only political theory and economics but also in philosophy (that is, by advancing political theory, he also advanced philosophy).<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> CW: 5: 6. I quote Engels's version, since it was this to which Gramsci had access. When I discuss Marx's *Theses* in Chapter Five, I reference Marx's original version.

<sup>20</sup> Q 4, 38, 455-6.

<sup>21</sup> Q 2355.

<sup>22</sup> Q 4, 38, 464-5.

Gramsci's attempt to theorize the concept of ideology within the framework of his initial "return to Marx" in Notebook 4 represents, not a terminal, but more accurately, a transit point towards a much deeper motivation, namely, that of fundamentally redefining the entire nature of philosophy in terms of political relations of hegemony. The radical displacement of the traditional categories of truth and knowledge onto the political terrain of ideological struggle will become the foundation for the re-elaboration of philosophy itself as necessarily practically, politically, and ideologically overdetermined. In accordance with Gramsci's re-reading of the second thesis on Feuerbach, the truth, i.e. reality and power of philosophy will not be located on a transcendent plane in relation to the political and ideological terrain; on the contrary, it will find its concrete ground in the real or effective relations of political and class struggle, hence on a *continuum* with ideology, distinguishable from the latter only according to its degree of effectiveness and expansivity from the standpoint of hegemony.<sup>23</sup>

### 2.3 Politics as an ontological principle

This dilated, gnoseological conception of the ideological-superstructural forms as constituting the common and necessary terrain both of consciousness and knowledge,<sup>24</sup> is undergirded by Gramsci's construal of "the ensemble of the social relations" propounded by Marx in the sixth thesis on Feuerbach, an affirmation that becomes, as Frosini puts it, 'the center of gravity' of Gramsci's reading.<sup>25</sup> The latter, in fact, does not limit Marx's famous thesis simply to a proposition about how to understand human nature. Marx wrote that, 'Feuerbach resolves the essence of religion into the essence of man. But the essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality, it is the ensemble of the social relations'.<sup>26</sup> In contrast, Gramsci modifies Marx's statements in his translation of the sixth thesis: 'Feuerbach resolves religious reality into human reality. But human reality is not an abstraction immanent in the single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations'.<sup>27</sup> Although retaining Marx's term "essence" in brackets above the first two appearances of his own term "reality", it is nevertheless the latter term that Gramsci inserts as the operative term in his translation. Gramsci, in other words, transforms Marx's statements about how to understand human nature into a stronger, ontological

<sup>23</sup> Liguori 2004, 146, Frosini 2003, 91.

<sup>24</sup> Liguori 2004, 138.

<sup>25</sup> Frosini 2004, 100. For Gramsci, Marx's fundamental innovation (in relation to Machiavelli) consisted in 'the demonstration that "human nature", fixed and immutable, does not exist', construed instead as a "historically developing organism, Q 4, 8, 430-1.

<sup>26</sup> CW: 5: 7.

<sup>27</sup> Q 2357.

thesis concerning the nature of reality. Not simply human nature, but human reality itself, that is, the only reality with which we are familiar and about which we can claim to know,<sup>28</sup> is constituted by the ensemble of social relations.

The latter, in turn, is explicitly conceived as a terrain of struggle and conflict. Confronting Feuerbach's naturalistic, biological, and anthropological conception of human beings supposedly neatly encapsulated in the famous claim that "man is what he eats",<sup>29</sup> Gramsci proceeds to the contention

That "human nature" is the "ensemble of social relations" is the most satisfying answer, because it includes the idea of becoming - man becomes, he changes continuously with the changing of social relations - and because it negates "man in general". Indeed, social relations are expressed by diverse groups of men that presuppose one another, and their unity is dialectical, not formal. Man is aristocratic insofar as man is a serf, etc. . . . One could also say that the nature of man is "history" . . . if history is taken to mean, precisely, "becoming" in a "Concordia discors" that does not have unity for its point of departure but contains in itself the reasons for a possible unity.<sup>30</sup>

The ensemble of social relations is fundamentally a dialectical network of class contradictions and antagonisms, and precisely because of this, is necessarily historical. Hence, not simply the "nature" of human beings themselves, but indeed reality itself, are constituted and understood within the historical framework of social contradictions and conflicts. Gramsci has fused Marx's sixth and fourth theses, i.e. the conception of human nature in terms of the historical ensemble of social relations with Marx's characterization of the latter in terms of its 'inner strife and intrinsic contradictoriness'.<sup>31</sup>

In addition to the *Theses*, *The Communist Manifesto* and *The Poverty of Philosophy* represent two further Marxian sources of Gramsci's conception of the ensemble of social relations. Gramsci translated the first part of the *Manifesto*, "Bourgeois and Proletarians", significantly giving it the title "Theory of history",<sup>32</sup> that is, the section in which Marx famously proclaimed that 'The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles', that 'Freeman and slave, patrician and plebian, lord and serf',

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<sup>28</sup> As Gramsci claims, 'to look for reality outside of man appears to be a paradox, just as for religion it is a paradox to look for it outside of God', Q 4, 41, 467.

<sup>29</sup> See Buttigieg's "Notes" in Gramsci 2007a, 517. It may have been under the direct impact of Gentile that Gramsci was led to take up the Feuerbachian claim. Gentile had explicitly confronted Feuerbach's thesis that "man is what he eats" in his analysis of Marx's sixth thesis, Gentile 2014, 142-3.

<sup>30</sup> Q 7, 35, 884-5, written in 1931.

<sup>31</sup> CW: 5: 7-8. This Gramsci translated as the "self-laceration" and "inner contradiction" traversing the social world, Q 2356.

<sup>32</sup> The translation appears, along with a number of other Marxian texts, at the beginning of Notebook 7, thus the same Notebook of the passage cited above (Q 7, 35), Gramsci 2007b, 748.



bourgeoisie and proletariat have stood in direct opposition to one another,<sup>33</sup> formulations remarkably similar to Gramsci's cited above. These well-known assertions in the *Manifesto* were the fruit of Marx's theorization of society as a historical succession of fundamental class contradictions founded on antagonistic relations of production in *The Poverty of Philosophy*. 'Society', Marx argued, is 'social relations based on class antagonism. These relations are not relations between individual and individual, but between worker and capitalist, between farmer and landlord, etc. Wipe out these relations and you annihilate all society'.<sup>34</sup> 'The real, profane history of men', is not at all, as Proudhon thought, a purely logical dialectical succession of ideas in complete abstraction from historical time, but rather, the real historical and dialectical movement of class struggle and contradictions rooted in antagonistic social production relations which are themselves, bound up with the development of the material productive forces.<sup>35</sup> From this standpoint, Marx affirmed that 'all history is nothing but a continuous transformation of human nature'.<sup>36</sup> Humans change in connection with the continual transformation of social relations. Thus, human thought, i.e. ideas and categories, 'are as little eternal as the relations they express. They are *historical and transitory products*'.<sup>37</sup> Once again, the parallels between these formulations and Gramsci's own are pellucid, and in fact, the latter considered this text to be crucial for understanding 'the concept of dialectics specific to historical materialism'.<sup>38</sup>

There is, in other words, a noticeable convergence of several Marxian texts that are pivotal in shaping the way Gramsci conceptualizes reality as necessarily historical, founded upon contradictory and antagonistic ensembles of social and class relations, and therefore, human beings themselves as constituted on the same terrain of historical struggle. Gramsci's decisive move consists in taking over these affirmations by Marx, and using them as a foundation on which to transform politics into an ontological, and therefore, gnoseological principle. As he would later write, 'reality' is 'struggle and contradiction', 'the dialectic' of 'historical becoming'.<sup>39</sup> As an arena of class struggle, reality is essentially political, and the understanding of human beings as the ensemble of the social relations leads to the conclusion that 'man is essentially "political"'.<sup>40</sup>

This political ontology of the social body finds its locus in the relations of forces. On the basis of the fundamental, contradictory and antagonistic relation of social forces, i.e. the structural constitution of

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<sup>33</sup> CW: 6: 482, 485.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 159.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 162-70, 174-78.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 192.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 166.

<sup>38</sup> Q 4, 38, 461-2.

<sup>39</sup> Q 10, II, 41 (xii), 1320, written in the summer of 1932.

<sup>40</sup> Q 10, II, 48, 1337-8 (December 1932).

classes and social groups at the level of economic production - the various social groups 'formed on the basis of the level of development of the material forces of production', and each of which 'represents a function and a position within production itself', Gramsci seeks to understand how classes constitute themselves, organize, and acquire consciousness on the terrain of political and ideological struggle. Accordingly, he posits a subsequent moment or level - 'the political "relation of forces": that is, the assessment of the degree of homogeneity and self-consciousness attained by the various social groups', which can be further subdivided 'into various moments corresponding to the different levels of political consciousness'. From the most rudimentary economic level, in which certain sections internal to a social group attain consciousness of a solidarity of interests, to that of the social group as a whole, although still confined to economic interests, Gramsci then fixes the highest level of political consciousness, in which there is a recognition that one's own economic-corporate class interests must ascend beyond these confines, becoming the interests of other subordinate groups:

This is the most patently "political" phase, which marks the clear-cut transition from the structure to complex superstructures; it is the phase in which previously germinated ideologies come into contact and confrontation with one another, until one of them - or, at least, a single combination of them - tends to prevail, to dominate, to spread across the entire field, bring about, in addition to economic and political unity, intellectual and moral unity, not on a corporate but on a universal level: the hegemony of a fundamental social group over the subordinate groups.<sup>41</sup>

The "inner contradictions" by which society is lacerated are grasped in their necessary political and ideological articulations and thus, reality is fundamentally political, the terrain of hegemonic struggle between conflicting relations of forces, a struggle which ultimately orbits around the fundamental social groups, in other words, those that perform essential functions 'in the decisive core of economic activity', in short, 'the world of production, labor'.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, the introduction of the idea of relations of forces occurs in the same note in which Gramsci also claimed 'That the value of Marx's assertion - that men become conscious of economic conflicts on the terrain of ideology - isgnoseological and not

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<sup>41</sup> Q 4, 38, 457-8. Here again, *The Poverty of Philosophy* provides Gramsci with an important reference point for thinking through the relations of force, 'where it says that an important phase in the development of a social group born on the terrain of industry is the phase in which the individual members of an economic-corporate organization no longer struggle solely for their own corporate economic interests but for the development of the organization itself', *ibid.* 461. Gramsci is referring specifically to the section "Strikes and Combinations of Workers", in which Marx considers how, on the basis of the constitution of the workers as a class with 'a common situation, common interests' deriving from economic conditions of production, they actively constitute themselves politically as a class "for itself" in direct opposition to the bourgeoisie, that is, how 'a society founded on the *opposition* of classes should culminate in brutal *contradiction*', 'a total revolution', CW: 6: 206-12.

<sup>42</sup> Q 4, 38, 461, Q 7, 12, 863. As Gramsci says, it 'is a struggle between "two conformisms", that is, a struggle for hegemony', *ibid.* 862.

psychological or moral, it follows that the value of the concept of hegemony, too, is gnoseological',<sup>43</sup> and in fact, one note after Gramsci had re-read the concept of ideology departing from Marx's reformulation of truth as the "this-worldliness" (*Diesseitigkeit*) of thought linked to political praxis. The necessary site of theoretical relations, and therefore, of effective relations of human knowledge lies inside the concrete terrain of hegemonic struggle between antagonistic relations of social, political, and ideological forces, in short, within the historical ensemble of social relations understood as a conflictual, hegemonic political articulation on the basis of the fundamental contradictions rooted in the economic structure of production. As Thomas argues,

In a strict sense, for Gramsci, there is no knowledge outside the superstructures - or, what is the same thing, the ideologies - for the simple reason that such an outside does not exist: "ideas do not fall from the sky", in Labriola's memorable phrase, but are historically produced as a social relation. Thus, when Gramsci says that a form of knowledge is superstructural (ideological) . . . it points to the political status of these forms, or the political overdetermination of knowledge itself, within an historicist perspective.<sup>44</sup>

It is because human thought and relations of knowledge are formed within historically determinate relations of social and political struggle that Gramsci can outline a perspective in which human thought and knowledge necessarily have an ideological and therefore, political status.

## **2.4 The beginnings of a fundamental redefinition of philosophy, and the early emergence of the philosophy of praxis**

The apprehension of reality and human beings themselves as historically and politically constituted within a contradictory field of social struggle, and therefore, that of the entire terrain of human thought and knowledge as constituting an antagonistic and contradictory field, i.e. the "ideological terrain of superstructures, or as Gramsci later articulated, the complex, discordant, and contradictory ensemble of the superstructures,"<sup>45</sup> provides the conceptual framework for the re-elaboration of the nature of

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<sup>43</sup> Q 4, 38, 464-5.

<sup>44</sup> Thomas 2010, 101.

<sup>45</sup> Q 8, 182, 1051. This view was enunciated in the following unequivocal terms in 1934: 'The "nature" of man is the ensemble of social relations that determines a historically defined consciousness . . . the ensemble of social relations is contradictory at any one time and is in continual development, since the "nature" of man is not

philosophy itself, analyzed historically and politically as the expressions of the internal class contradictions of society. ‘All hitherto-existing philosophy’ Gramsci writes ‘has been the product and the expression of the inner contradictions of society’.<sup>46</sup> It follows that the historicity of philosophy is dialectical, a terrain of conflict and struggle between a multiplicity of competing philosophical systems and conceptions of the world.<sup>47</sup> Consequently, no single philosophical conception can be the full representation of the contradictory social world. Instead this will be accomplished only by the entire complex of antagonistic philosophies taken as an aggregate.<sup>48</sup> The conflicts and scissions constitutive of reality are reflected both in human nature and the theoretical-philosophical domain. Thus, the claims made by philosophers to represent or express ‘the unity of the human spirit’, or “Man in general”, are explicable as practical, ideological maneuvers, that is, as attempts to construct images of unity, harmony, and universality in place of the real fractures and conflicts traversing the social world. Rather than a simple flight from reality, Gramsci registers the practical (i.e. political and ideological) effects of such philosophical constructions. By painting pictures of unity they have an appeal, one which furthermore, stimulates action. Without them, ‘men would not act, they would not create new history; in other words, philosophies could not become “ideologies”, they could not, in practice, acquire the fanatical granite solidity of “popular beliefs”, which have the equivalence of “material forces”’.<sup>49</sup> Analogously, to affirm a world devoid of contradictions and conflicts would be tantamount to the creation of a utopia. Nevertheless, ‘This does not mean that utopia is devoid of philosophical value, for it has a political value, and every politics is implicitly a philosophy’.<sup>50</sup> In a world founded on conflict and division, the “unitary”

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something homogeneous for all men all through time . . . Given that, since the ensemble of social relations is contradictory, the consciousness of men cannot but be contradictory’, Q 16, 12, 1874-5.

<sup>46</sup> Q 4, 45, 471. Again, this is a clear reference to Marx’s fourth thesis, the ‘inner contradictions’ of society corresponding to Gramsci’s translation of the fourth thesis (the ‘inner contradiction’ of society), Q 2356.

<sup>47</sup> Q 4, 45, 471. As he later wrote, viewed concretely, that is, from the standpoint of concrete history, ‘the historicity of philosophies . . . is dialectical because it gives rise to struggles between systems, to struggles between ways of seeing reality’, Q 10, II, 41 (i), 1299.

<sup>48</sup> Q 4, 45, 471. It is only in this sense that one can speak of a “philosophy of the age”. This theme occupied Gramsci from the beginning of the Notebooks. Cf. Q 1, 10, 9, and Q 1, 151, 134. However, in Q 4, 45, we can see him start to reformulate the Hegelian thesis of the immanent unity or identity of philosophy and history. Around the same time (October-November 1930), he defined the “philosophy of the age” as ‘the mass of sentiments [and conceptions of the world] prevalent among the “silent” multitude’, Q 5, 54, 587.

<sup>49</sup> Q 4, 45, 471. Here, Gramsci is recalling Marx’s statement in *Capital* that ‘The secret of the expression of value, namely, that all kinds of labor are equal and equivalent, because, and so far as they are human labor in general, cannot be deciphered, until the notion of human equality has already acquired the fixity of a popular prejudice’, CW: 35: 70. The reference to “material forces” is from Marx’s “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right: Introduction”, in which it said that ‘theory also becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses’, CW: 3: 182. Gramsci had a French version of this text in prison. Both references to Marx are alluded to, again, in Q 7, 21, 869, a note significantly entitled “The validity of ideologies”.

<sup>50</sup> Q 4, 45, 471-2.

concepts of philosophy cannot but be practical, i.e. political and ideological, hence understood from the standpoint of their political and ideological effects.

Within this framework, ‘historical materialism’ is distinguished by the fact that it ‘conceives of itself as a transitory phase in philosophical thought’. As a philosophy, ‘it is the full consciousness of contradictions, the consciousness wherein the philosopher himself, understood both as an individual and as a social group, not only understands contradictions but posits himself as an element of the contradiction and raises this element to a principle of politics and action’.<sup>51</sup> Here, there is an implicit reference to the fourth thesis, in which Marx wrote that the fact of religious self-estrangement must ‘be explained by the inner strife and intrinsic contradictoriness’ characteristic of the “secular” or “earthly” world, and that ‘The latter must itself, therefore, first be understood in its contradiction and then, by the removal of the contradiction, revolutionized in practice’, in short, ‘criticized in theory and transformed in practice’.<sup>52</sup> Also implicit here is Marx’s second thesis; the ‘inner strife and intrinsic contradictoriness’ characteristic of the “secular” or “earthly” basis of thought was translated by Gramsci as the “worldly” or “earthly” basis (*la base mondana*), hence, directly linked to Gramsci’s translation of Marx’s term *Diesseitigkeit* - i.e. the “this-worldliness” of thought which concretely proves its truth in practice, which the former rendered directly (*il carattere terreno*) - i.e. the “worldly” or “earthly” character of truth linked to practical power.<sup>53</sup>

To reiterate, in a world founded on contradiction and conflict, all of the human relations of thought and knowledge formed on its conflictual basis are ideological (political). On the other hand, as Liguori correctly states, ‘not all ideologies are equal’.<sup>54</sup> As an ideological or philosophical superstructure, Marxism does not respond to the struggles and cleavages of social reality by attempting to place itself in a position of transcendence from which it claims to represent or express the impartial interests of all humanity; it does not construct images and concepts of unity in place of the strife constitutive of reality. On the contrary, it takes the terrain of struggle and contradiction as its analytical point of departure. Thus, it does not set itself above that about which it theorizes, but recognizes its own “earthly” or “worldly” basis in the antagonistic social world, its own historical and practical (ideological) character as a theory

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> CW: 5: 7.

<sup>53</sup> Q 2355-6. As suggested in the previous chapter, underlying Gramsci’s attention to, and translation of, Marx’s *Theses*, is a strategic, linguistic battle against the Gentilian reading and translation. Rather than the “worldly” or “earthly” basis of thought (*la base mondana*), Gentile translated this as “substrate” (*sostrato*) in an attempt to force Marx into a materialist metaphysical essentialism. In addition, instead of the “worldly” or “earthly” character of truth (*il carattere terreno*), he strangely translated Marx’s *Diesseitigkeit* as the “positivity” (*la positività*) of thought, Gentile 2014, 117-8.

<sup>54</sup> Liguori 2004, 138.

linked to a particular class in a specific historical situation. It is, in other words, a concrete mode of interpreting and understanding the antagonistic social world “from within” it (immanently), that is, necessarily within or inside the political field of social conflicts, and from a particular social, practical, i.e. political and ideological standpoint assumed within it.<sup>55</sup> It is conscious of (rather than seeking to deny) its own partiality as a theory, form of knowing and understanding from a particular class standpoint within the struggle itself with other antagonistic social groups and classes, along with their corresponding ideological and philosophical expressions. In short, it is a ‘philosophy of the act (praxis)’ in the ‘real’, ‘profane sense’.<sup>56</sup>

This concrete sense of immanence as a mode of theorizing and knowing practically and politically from a particular standpoint situated within the class struggle, still only implicit in the fall of 1930, is lurking underneath the first appearance, in its exact form, of the locution “philosophy of praxis”. Gramsci argues that Machiavelli ‘also articulated a conception of the world that could also be called “philosophy of praxis” . . . in that it does not recognize transcendental or immanent (in the metaphysical sense) elements but is based entirely on the concrete action of men, who out of historical necessity works and transforms reality’.<sup>57</sup> According to Gramsci, Machiavelli was, like Marx, a theoretician ‘of militant politics, of action’,<sup>58</sup> bringing ‘everything back to politics’. He did not speculatively envisage a utopian, ideal state of affairs, but composed books of “immediate political action” linked to the analysis of the concrete present, i.e. to the concrete political situation.<sup>59</sup> He did so moreover, from the standpoint of a particular class, and with a view towards the concrete transformation of reality.<sup>60</sup> As Gramsci later wrote, in Notebook 13 dedicated to Machiavelli, the latter ‘is not merely a scientist: he is a partisan, a man of powerful passions, an active politician, who wishes to create new relations of forces’. Accordingly, he

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<sup>55</sup> ‘The philosopher . . . cannot evade the present terrain of contradictions’, ‘even historical materialism is an expression of historical contradictions’, and ‘conceives of itself as a transitory phase in philosophical thought’, Q 4, 45, 471. Or, as he put it earlier, ‘as a philosophy’, historical materialism not only ‘asserts theoretically that every “truth” thought to be eternal and absolute has practical origins and has represented or represents a provisional value’, it goes further and applies this historicist framework “in practice” to itself, Q 4, 40, 465.

<sup>56</sup> Q 4, 37, 455. Interestingly, such terminology is identical to Marx’s emphasis on ‘the real, profane history of men’, in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, CW: 6: 170. As a philosophy of the act (praxis) in the concrete sense, it is a theory that finds its basis in and seeks to grasp the historical ensemble of contradictory and antagonistic social relations that Marx had stressed in that text.

<sup>57</sup> Q 5, 127, 657, written in November-December 1930, significantly just after the previously discussed Q 4, 45 (October-November 1930), and Q 4, 37 (September-October 1930).

<sup>58</sup> Q 4, 10, 432. In this note, entitled “Marx and Machiavelli”, Gramsci had written of the need for ‘a study of the real connections between the two as theoreticians of militant politics, of action’. The close link between the two, which Gramsci establishes from the beginning of his return to Marx in Notebook 4, had earlier been made by Croce, who referred to Marx as the continuer of Machiavelli, Croce 1900, 157.

<sup>59</sup> Q 5, 127, 657.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., Q 4, 8, 430-1, Q 4, 10, 432. Machiavelli wrote from the standpoint of “those who are not in the know”, i.e. ‘The revolutionary class of the time, the Italian people and nation’, just as Marx had addressed his thought to a specific class, Q 4, 8, 431.

based his thought on “effective reality” (*realità effettuale*), that is, the concrete terrain of ‘a relation of forces in continuous movement and change of equilibrium’.<sup>61</sup> As Thomas stresses, in ‘the moment of politics’, there is the demonstration of ‘the *necessary particularism or partiality* of a knowledge and intellectual practice that has dispensed with any “transcendental elements” and bases itself entirely upon the “concrete action” of “man” in history. In Machiavelli, Gramsci finds the figure of the politician as a new type of intellectual who “knows” the conjuncture on the basis of assessing the conditions necessary to intervene in it, actively and effectively’.<sup>62</sup> Machiavelli thus provided a model for a conception of the world as a “philosophy of praxis”, fundamentally opposed to the metaphysics of transcendence and immanence (in the metaphysical sense), Gramsci tacitly suggesting a link between Machiavelli, as a theorist and philosopher of the effective reality of relations of forces from a particular standpoint within it, and a concrete, non-metaphysical conception of immanence.

## 2.5 Translatability

The next appearance of the term “philosophy of praxis” appears in the crucial Q 7, 35, in which as Haug correctly says, we encounter the first emergence in the Notebooks of the locution “philosophy of praxis” ‘in the sense of a developing self-understanding’.<sup>63</sup> It figures as a concluding formulation to the argument, examined earlier, that human nature is the ensemble of social relations, understood historically and politically as the concrete terrain of class struggle and antagonisms, Gramsci concluding that

Thus one arrives also at the equality of, or the equation between, “philosophy and politics,” thought and action, that is, at a philosophy of praxis. Everything is political, even philosophy or philosophies (see the notes on the character of ideologies), and the only “philosophy” is history in action, life itself. It is in this sense that one can interpret the thesis that the German proletariat was the heir of classical German philosophy - and one can affirm that Ilyich’s theorization and realization of hegemony was also a great “metaphysical” event.<sup>64</sup>

Underlying these claims is the important notion of the mutual or reciprocal translatability between theory and practice, philosophy and politics, which had been at the center of Gramsci’s attention

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<sup>61</sup> Q 13, 16, 1577-8.

<sup>62</sup> Thomas 2010, 426.

<sup>63</sup> Haug 2000, 1.

<sup>64</sup> Q 7, 35, 886.

from the first Notebook.<sup>65</sup> In the first reference to this idea, Gramsci wrote that ‘Jacobin phraseology’, i.e. the political and ideological language of *égalité* and *fraternité* ‘corresponded perfectly to the formulas of classical German philosophy’, referring the reader to Marx’s *The Holy Family*.<sup>66</sup> Gramsci is alluding to the passage in which Marx said,

If Herr Edgar compares French *equality* with German “self-consciousness” for an instant, he will see that the latter principle expresses *in German*, i.e., in abstract thought, what the former says *in French*, that is, in the language of politics and of thoughtful observation. Self-consciousness is man's equality with himself in pure thought. Equality is man's consciousness of himself in the element of practice, i.e., man's consciousness of other men as his equals and man's attitude to other men as his equals. Equality is the French expression for the unity of human essence, for man's consciousness of his species and his attitude towards his species, for the practical identity of man with man, i.e., for the social or human relation of man to man.<sup>67</sup>

A little later, Gramsci again recalls how Marx, in *The Holy Family*, ‘reduces the French maxim “liberté, fraternité, égalité” to German philosophical concepts’, a reduction which the former claims ‘is extremely important theoretically’.<sup>68</sup>

As the specific contexts of these passages indicate, Jacobin political practice and German classical philosophy correspond respectively, to the European historical period characterized by the French Revolution and the Restoration. If the Jacobin political and ideological discourse of *liberté*, *fraternité*, and *égalité* ‘reflected perfectly the needs of the time, in keeping with French traditions and culture’, i.e. to the popular and violent “revolutionary explosion” through which the French bourgeoisie founded its own state, thus elevating itself to the dominant, ‘leading hegemonic class’, the concepts of classical German philosophy corresponded to the Restoration, i.e. to the period of reaction against this form of hegemony: ‘it is the political form in which the class struggle finds a flexible situation which allows the bourgeoisie to attain power without massive disturbances, without the French terroristic apparatus’, or what Gramsci called “reaction - national transcendence” of the French Revolution and Bonapartism, later adding in the margins “passive revolution”.<sup>69</sup> Understood thus, German philosophy is not a speculative flight from concrete political reality, but rather, politics in another form or in a different

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<sup>65</sup> On the broader concept of translatability in Gramsci, see Boothman 2004, 247-66.

<sup>66</sup> Q 1, 44, 51.

<sup>67</sup> CW: 4: 39. In prison, Gramsci had a copy of this text in French.

<sup>68</sup> Q 1, 151, 134.

<sup>69</sup> Q 1, 44, 51, Q 1, 151, 134, Q 1, 150, 133. As he later put it, ‘The concept of passive revolution . . . applies not only to Italy but also to those other countries that modernize the state through a series of reforms or national wars without undergoing a political revolution of a radical-Jacobin type’, Q 4, 57, 504 (November 1930).



register. It corresponds to the hegemonic theoretical functions exercised by traditional intellectuals in the modern state structures that developed through forms of passive revolution during the Restoration period, rather than through a popular revolutionary explosion like in France. ‘What is “politics” for the productive class becomes “rationality” for the intellectual class’, meaning that if the bourgeois class in France conceived the state ‘as the concrete form of a specific economic world, of a specific system of production’, in the states that developed through passive revolution, ‘the class bearing the new ideas is the class of intellectuals and the conception of the state changes . . . The state is conceived as a thing in itself, as a rational absolute’. ‘This motif’, Gramsci writes, ‘is fundamental for philosophical idealism’.<sup>70</sup>

This is the basic historical framework within which Gramsci develops the theoretical conception of the mutual or reciprocal relation of translatability between French politics and German philosophy, practice and theory. After referring again to the passage from *The Holy Family* wherein shows how ‘French political language’ is “translated” into ‘the language of classical German philosophy’, a statement which, for Gramsci, ‘is very important for understanding the innermost value of historical materialism’, he elaborates that

Just as two individuals produced by the same basic culture believe that their opinions differ simply because they use different terminologies, so also in the international sphere, two cultures, expressions of two fundamentally similar civilizations, believe that they are antagonistic, different, each one superior to the other, because they use different ideological, philosophical terms or because one has a more strictly practical, political character (France) while the other is more philosophical, doctrinal, theoretical. In reality, to the historian, they are *interchangeable*: each one is reducible to the other; they are mutually translatable.<sup>71</sup>

French politics and German philosophy represent two distinct, yet mutually interchangeable national and cultural expressions (“languages”) of the same basic content, namely, the historical rise to power and consolidation of hegemony of the bourgeoisie across Europe. While the practical, political and ideological language of *liberté*, *fraternité*, and *égalité* corresponded to the needs of the ascendant bourgeoisie during the French Revolution, the theoretical and conceptual translation of the significance of the Revolution into the terms of German classical philosophy represented the speculative absorption and domestication of the practical effects of the Revolution within the logic of passive revolution. Hence, beneath the seemingly abstract and speculative language of philosophy lies a precise practical, political, ideological,

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<sup>70</sup> Q 1, 151, 134, Q 1, 150, 132-3.

<sup>71</sup> Q 4, 42, 467-8.

and hegemonic function, while on the other hand, philosophy is in some way implicit in Jacobin political practice.

This is the springboard for the more general notion that every politics is implicitly a philosophy, and that, vice versa, every philosophy is implicitly a form of doing politics, i.e. the mutual or reciprocal translatability between theory and practice, philosophy and politics, that Gramsci detected in *The Holy Family*, an idea which is present in the previously discussed Q 4, 45, and with which Q 7, 35 is integrally linked. As we have seen, beneath the unitary concepts of philosophy, Gramsci deciphered their practical, political, and ideological functions. The construction of images of human unity in a society wracked by conflicts and contradictions is tantamount to the creation of a utopia. Nevertheless, ‘this does not mean that utopia is devoid of philosophical value, for it has a political value, and every politics is implicitly a philosophy’.<sup>72</sup>

In fact, two things are happening in the work of “translation”. On one hand, the speculative concepts of philosophy are translated into their real terms as a form of doing politics, a practical ideological intervention. On the other hand, this process of critical translation does not mean the total abandonment and liquidation of these philosophical concepts, but rather, their “re-translation” and reformulation in concrete, realistic, and historical terms. In other words, after the translation of philosophical ideas into their real terms as politics, the former are then reconstituted and reformulated departing from the latter. Translation therefore involves both a critical, destructive part, and a positive re-appropriation and transformation. Accordingly, concepts of ‘the unity of the human spirit’, and ‘equality, liberty, and fraternity’ are not wholly dispensed with. Instead, Marxist theory reformulates these concepts in concrete terms as a historical possibility contingent upon the political struggle to supersede social contradictions and antagonisms.<sup>73</sup>

In Q 7, 35, Gramsci pursues a similar argument. After contending against all unitary philosophical conceptions of “man” and “human nature”, whether this is conceived in the Feuerbachian sense as a naturalistic “biological unity”, in traditional philosophical terms as the unity of the human “spirit” in the faculty of “self-consciousness” or reason, or in religion as the equality of men as God’s sons, in favor of the view of humans as constituted on the historical terrain of class contradictions that traverse the real world, these universal and unitary concepts are translated into the terms of politics and hegemony. Concepts like “Equality”, “spirituality”, and “human nature” are to be understood in terms of ‘the system of explicit and implicit “private and public” associations that are woven together in the “state”

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<sup>72</sup> Q 4, 45, 471-2.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

and in the world political system. These are “equalities” that are felt as such among the members of an association and “inequalities” that are felt between associations - equalities and inequalities that count insofar as individuals and groups are conscious of them’.<sup>74</sup> Such concepts, in other words, find their meaning and value in the concrete world of politics, the integral state, and the hegemonic struggle between social groups and classes. Philosophy, i.e. relations of theory, concepts, and knowledge, must be comprehended as a mode of doing and practicing politics, even if in a speculative form or language, because philosophical ideas have practical effects at the level of politics. Conversely, politics has philosophical implications because political action and struggle produce effects at the level of relations of thought and knowledge. Marxism rethinks the whole of philosophy, including its own status as a philosophy, departing from the primacy of politics rather than from the speculative position of philosophy.

It is in this sense that Gramsci concluded his argument in the previously cited Q 7, 35. As a philosophy of praxis, Marxism not only critically and rationally translates all philosophical thought into the concrete terms of politics and action, thus uncovering its status as a practical and ideological form, it also thinks its own philosophical status departing from the terrain of political struggle, and hence, of itself as an ideology or conception of the world of the masses. As Gramsci wrote two notes earlier, ‘The statement that the German proletariat is the heir of German classical philosophy’, is an expression of ‘Marx’s intention to indicate that the historical function of his philosophy - which became a theory of a class - would become a state’. Engels’ famous closing line in his book, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the end of Classical German Philosophy*,<sup>75</sup> means that Marx critically re-appropriated and transformed the concepts of unity, truth, and universality from German philosophy into the terms of politics, or more precisely, the hegemony of a fundamental social class that founds its own state.<sup>76</sup> Whence derives the meaning of the reference to Lenin. If Marx wanted to make his philosophy the conception of the world of a class that wishes to establish its own state, with Lenin ‘this actually transpired in a particular territory’, and the foundation of a new state ‘is equivalent to the creation of a Weltanschauung’. ‘The realization of hegemony means the real critique of a philosophy, its real dialectic’. The practical, political realization of a class’s hegemony at the level of the state represents a new philosophy or conception of the world, since it fundamentally reshapes the terrain of thought and knowledge, that is, the entire ideological and

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<sup>74</sup> Q 7, 35, 883-6.

<sup>75</sup> Gramsci is referring to Engels’s claim that ‘The German working-class movement is the inheritor of German classical philosophy’, Engels 1976, 60. He had a copy of this text in Italian translation prior to his arrest.

<sup>76</sup> Gramsci’s first reference to Engels’ claim is also clearly linked to this theme of the translatability of German classical philosophy into politics, in which Hegel’s comprehension of the French Revolution in terms of “world spirit” or the “philosophy of history” should lead towards ‘the identification of philosophy with history, action with thought, and the “German proletariat as the sole inheritor of classical German philosophy”’, Q 4, 56, 504.

philosophical field. In this sense, we can understand Gramsci's earlier assertion that 'the value of the concept of hegemony . . . isgnoseological. This concept . . . should be regarded as Ilyich's greatest contribution to Marxist philosophy, to historical materialism: an original and creative contribution. In this respect, Ilyich advanced Marxism not only in political theory and economics but also in philosophy (that is, by advancing political theory, he also advanced philosophy)'.<sup>77</sup> This conception is clearly enunciated in the second draft of this note: 'The realization of a hegemonic apparatus, insofar as it creates a new ideological terrain, determines a reform of consciousness and of methods of knowledge, is a fact of knowledge, a philosophical fact . . . an entire philosophical reform'.<sup>78</sup>

Gramsci will continue to pursue this dual enterprise of fundamentally redefining the entire nature of philosophy in terms of its political and ideological functions, and the attempt, within this broader re-conceptualization of all philosophy, to rethink the philosophical specificity of Marx's thought, over course of 1932, particularly in Notebooks 8, 10, and 11. The dilated,gnoseological reformulation of ideology that this chapter has attempted to explicate, continues to function as the central framework within which Gramsci conducts his philosophical reflections, enabling him to grasp all philosophy, including Marxism, in terms of its truth, or practical power on the ideological terrain of political and hegemonic struggle. Within this broader prism, the notion of translatability continues to be operative, providing Gramsci with an analytical key according to which to reinterpret, or "translate" traditional philosophy and philosophical concepts into the terms of their practical, political, ideological, and hegemonic functions, at the same time that it enables him to rethink the distinctive philosophical nature of Marx's theory, as a conception that does not absorb political struggle and conflicts within the speculative web of traditional philosophy, but instead rethinks itself as a philosophy consciously departing from the primacy of the political struggle. It is to the exploration of these dynamics that I turn in the following chapter.

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<sup>77</sup> Q 4, 38, 465. Gramsci's contemporaneous statement that one should look for the "true" philosophy of a politician in his political writings and activity, was surely a reference to Lenin, as well as Marx, Q 4, 46, 473.

<sup>78</sup> Q 10, II, 12, 1250.

### **Chapter Three**

## **Philosophy as hegemony, and the philosophy of praxis as an absolute immanence**

### **3.1 The crystallization of a philosophical conception**

From the standpoint of Gramsci's philosophical researches in the Notebooks, the year 1932 can be regarded as a watershed moment, in which his earlier reflections in the first and second series of "Notes on Philosophy" issue in a general redefinition of philosophy *tout court*, as well as a coherent conception, within this general redefinition, of the specificity of Marx's thought as a philosophy of praxis. Against the backdrop of the dilated,gnoseological conception of ideology, as well as the political ontology of social reality rooted in the relation of forces, philosophy is redefined as the conception of the world corresponding to the hegemony, or catharsis, of a fundamental social class over the whole of society. In this perspective, philosophy represents the form of consciousness with the maxim capacity of organization, condensation, and expansivity within the field of political and ideological struggle. Philosophy is, like all thought, ideological, being constituted historically and politically within a terrain of struggle between relations of social and political forces. However, philosophy emerges as the most effective and rationalized comprehension of these struggles in comparison with ideologies. Its truth, i.e. practical political power, is located on a continuum with ideology, being distinguishable from the latter only by degree. This general redefinition of philosophy emerges out of a sustained confrontation with Croce, a critique illustrative of Gramsci's entire critical approach to philosophy. Employing the analytical frame of translatability between philosophy and politics, Gramsci registers Croce's speculative philosophical thought, not as a detachment from political reality, but instead as a particularly efficacious form of politics conducted in the speculative language of traditional philosophy. All philosophy, even and especially in the form of speculation, must be critically translated into the political terms of hegemony.

On the other hand, what had been implicit since Notebook 4 now becomes explicit. Within the broader redefinition of all philosophy, the specificity of the philosophy of praxis lies in its status as a self-conscious mode of theorizing and knowing from a partial standpoint within the class struggle, as the hegemonic conception of the world of the masses. In this sense, the philosophy of praxis constitutes an absolute immanence, an absolute worldliness and earthliness of thought. This theory finds its concrete expression in the distinctive, dialectical and pedagogical relation that the philosophy of praxis establishes with the practical life, needs, and interests of the working masses, understood as a relation between

philosophy and common sense. The philosophy of praxis is not a theoretical moment transcendent or external to the historical, material, social, and political practices it seeks to comprehend, but is instead, a critique immanent in the practices that form its organic foundation, and which it strives to comprehend in order to transform. The distinctive truth-power of the philosophy of praxis lies in its capacity, as a mode of knowing from the specific standpoint of the masses, to transform the incoherence of common sense into a critical and coherent conception of the world organically rooted in the practical life of the masses, in this way maximizing its own practical power and transformative capacities as a philosophy which seeks to be the organizing center of a mass-based, hegemonic politics.

In this way, the philosophy of praxis is radically differentiated from the speculative philosophical tradition. It does not attempt to place itself in a transcendent, contemplative standpoint in relation to the political struggle, reabsorbing the latter within the speculative concepts of philosophical thought. Instead, it thinks its own positioning inside the political struggle, translating the incoherence of common sense into coherence in order to maximize the effectiveness of working class praxis. There is a mutual or reciprocal immanence, or translatability between masses and intellectuals, incoherence and coherence, practice and theory, politics and philosophy, departing from the primacy of politics.

### **3.2 Philosophy and common sense**

The conception of all philosophy as political, that is, as having practical effects on the ideological terrain of hegemonic struggle, the basic outlines of which were beginning to emerge in the first and second series of “Notes on Philosophy. Materialism and Idealism” in Notebooks 4 and 7, undergoes a significant development in the third series of “Notes on Philosophy” in Notebook 8, a direct continuation of Gramsci’s reflections in the first two series.<sup>1</sup> This takes place through the elaboration of the nexus between philosophy and politics in terms of the relation between philosophy and common sense. As in Notebooks 4 and 7, this enterprise involves both an attempt to formulate a general conception of philosophy as a whole, as well as an attempt, within this broader framework, to delineate what is distinctive or specific to Marxism as a philosophy (i.e. what makes the latter superior).

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<sup>1</sup> The composition of the third series chronologically extends from November 1931 - May 1932.

The philosophy-common sense dyad, as Frosini notes, was not present in Gramsci's pre-prison writings.<sup>2</sup> In sharp contrast, this relation becomes, in prison, the central axis around which the latter reformulates Marxism as a philosophy of praxis. The category of "common sense" is present from the very beginning of Gramsci's carceral research,<sup>3</sup> in which he is struggling, at this early stage, both to analytically differentiate between different grades and modes of consciousness, as well as establish the nature of their complex interrelations, in an effort to analyze the life and culture of the masses. He says, for example, that in Italy there exist many social groupings with their own local cultural traditions, 'characterized by their own ideological or psychological impulses', and that each social stratum has its own consciousness and its own culture. Consequently, it was necessary to study 'the most widely circulated and most popular literature combined with the study and criticism of previous ideological currents, each of which "may" have left a deposit in various combinations with preceding or subsequent deposits', in order to grasp the ways of thinking and opinions of the masses.<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere, he wrote that

Every social stratum has its own "common sense" which is ultimately the most widespread conception of life and morals. Every philosophical current leaves a sedimentation of "common sense": this is the document of its historical reality. Common sense is not something rigid and static; rather, it changes continuously, enriched by scientific notions and philosophical opinions which have entered into common usage. "Common sense" is the folklore of "philosophy" and stands midway between real "folklore" . . . and the philosophy, the science, the economics of the scholars. "Common sense" creates the folklore of the future, that is a more or less rigidified phase of a certain time and place. (It will be necessary to establish these concepts firmly by thinking them through in depth.)<sup>5</sup>

Hence, every social group or stratum possesses its own distinctive forms of consciousness, culture, and ideology, i.e. its own common sense, the most widespread conceptions of life and the world, which exist historically in a perpetual process of combination and recombination, incorporating traces of past ideologies, and even the philosophies and conceptions of the world of scholars and intellectuals, forming in this way the "folklore" of philosophy, and also the folklore and common sense thinking of the future.

Reflecting on his own past experiences, Gramsci argues that the great merit of the Turin communists during the factory councils movement consisted in the fact that the leadership 'devoted itself

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<sup>2</sup> Frosini 2003, 170.

<sup>3</sup> "Common sense", along with "the concept of folklore" are listed among the principal topics of study that open the first Notebook in early 1929, Q 1, 5.

<sup>4</sup> Q 1, 43, 33-4.

<sup>5</sup> Q 1, 65, 76.

to real people in specific historical relations, with specific sentiments, ways of life, fragments of worldviews', that this 'was not neglected, much less disdained: it was educated, it was given a direction, it was cleansed of everything extraneous that could contaminate it, in order to unify it by means of modern theory but in a living, historically effective manner', and furthermore, 'It gave the masses a "theoretical" consciousness of themselves as creators of historical and institutional values, as founders of states. This unity of "spontaneity" and "conscious leadership" . . . is precisely the real political action of the subaltern classes, insofar as it is mass politics and not a mere adventure by groups that appeal to the masses'. It follows that Marxist theory cannot be in fundamental opposition to 'the "spontaneous" sentiments of the masses ("spontaneous" in the sense that they are not due to the systematic educational activity of an already conscious leadership but have been formed through everyday experience in the light of "common sense", that is, the traditional popular conception of the world)'. Instead, 'there is, between the two, a "quantitative" difference - of degree not of quality; it should be possible to have a reciprocal "reduction" so to speak, a passage from one to the other and vice versa'.<sup>6</sup>

In Notebook 8, Gramsci resumes this project of resituating Marxist theory in an active, reciprocal and dialectical pedagogical relationship to the disparate and fragmented combinations of views, conceptions, and ways of life of the popular subaltern masses, albeit with the crucial difference that now, in late 1931, this takes place as part of the deepening process of fundamentally redefining philosophy that this paper has thus far attempted to trace. Indicative of this is the reappearance of folklore and common sense, along with the important addition of an "Introduction to the study of philosophy" among the list of topics to be dealt with at the beginning of Notebook 8,<sup>7</sup> suggesting that the necessity, announced in early 1930, of establishing 'these concepts firmly by thinking them through in depth',<sup>8</sup> was once again at the forefront of Gramsci's mind.

In his first attempt to theorize common sense in Notebook 8, Gramsci argues, in opposition to Bukharin's *Popular Manual*, which reinforces rather than critically transforms the vulgar elements of popular thought, that the elaboration of Marxist philosophy

should have as its point of departure an analysis and a critique of the philosophy of common sense, which is the "philosophy of nonphilosophers" - in other words, the conception of the world *acritically* absorbed from the various social environments in which the moral individuality of the average person is developed. Common sense is not a single conception, identical in time and place. It is the "folklore" of philosophy, and, like folklore, it appears in countless forms. The

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<sup>6</sup> Q 3, 48, 330-1. In a similar vein, cf. Q 4, 33, 451-2.

<sup>7</sup> Q 8, 935-6.

<sup>8</sup> Q 1, 65, 76.



fundamental characteristic of common sense consists in its being a disjointed, incoherent, and inconsequential conception of the world that matches the character of the multitudes whose philosophy it is . . . Common sense is a disorderly aggregate of philosophical conceptions in which one can find whatever one likes.<sup>9</sup>

Here, Gramsci builds on his earlier analyses of the common sense conceptions of the popular masses, those widely held and deeply ingrained views of life and the world that permeate mass consciousness, the fundamentally discordant, incoherent, and fragmented philosophies or conceptions of the world of the masses constituted through continual movement, absorption and re-absorption of various ideas - religious, philosophical, scientific, etc., both from the past and the present. But he is also intervening in a pre-existing debate concerning how to understand common sense and its relation to philosophy, confronting in particular, Croce and Gentile.<sup>10</sup> Croce affirmed a correspondence between philosophy and the common sense thinking of the average man, taking pleasure ‘in the fact that certain philosophical propositions are shared by common sense’, and ‘how popular ways of thinking confirm the validity of certain philosophical propositions’. Similarly, Gramsci quotes an article by Gentile,<sup>11</sup> in which the latter wrote that ‘Philosophy could be defined as a great effort by reflective thought to ascertain critically the truths of common sense and of naïve consciousness; of those truths that all men can be said to feel naturally and that constitute the solid structure of the mentality that helps man deal with life’.<sup>12</sup> Gentile, according to Gramsci, thus speaks of ‘the “truth of common sense” as if one couldn’t find whatever one wanted in “common sense” and as if there were just one, immutable, eternal “common sense”’.<sup>13</sup>

In a much broader sense, however, Gramsci thinks that philosophy has been concerned with its relation to common sense.<sup>14</sup> The question is of crucial importance, for the relationship between intellectuals and masses, “‘high philosophy and common sense is assured by “politics””, hence a question of hegemony.<sup>15</sup> Particularly in French philosophical culture, “common sense” has been treated more extensively than elsewhere. In France, ‘the intellectuals tend to approach the people in order to guide it ideologically and keep it linked with the leading group’. From this standpoint, ‘The attitude of French philosophical culture toward “common sense”’ could ‘provide a model of hegemonic cultural construction’. This, however, is an exceptional case given ‘the “popular-national character of French

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<sup>9</sup> Q 8, 173, 1045-6.

<sup>10</sup> Frosini 2003, 171-2.

<sup>11</sup> “La concezione umanistica del mondo”, *Nuova antologia* 66, no. 1412, 1931, 307-17.

<sup>12</sup> Q 8, 173, 1045, Q 8, 175, 1047.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Gramsci thinks that Kant, for example (like Croce) ‘considered it important for his philosophical theories to be in agreement with common sense’, Q 3, 48, 331.

<sup>15</sup> Q 8, 220, 1080.

culture'.<sup>16</sup> Generally speaking, as Gramsci later articulated, the link between the conceptions of the world of philosophers and intellectuals, or "high culture", and the consciousness of the masses is an indirect or mediated one, in the sense that the ideas of intellectuals are not directly known by the masses.

Nevertheless, such ideas manage to penetrate the common sense conceptions of the world of the popular classes in an unconscious way. They

influence the popular masses as an external political force, an element of cohesive force exercised by the ruling classes and therefore an element of subordination to an external hegemony. This limits the original thought of the popular masses in a negative direction, without having the positive effect of a vital ferment of interior transformation of what the masses think in an embryonic and chaotic form about the world and life.<sup>17</sup>

### 3.3 The philosophy of praxis as a critique of common sense

Significantly, it is in the context of this general elaboration of the nexus between philosophy and politics in terms of that between philosophy and common sense, intellectuals and masses, understood within the framework of hegemony, that the term "philosophy of praxis" makes its first appearance in the in the third series of "Notes on Philosophy". In a note entitled "Philosophy of praxis",<sup>18</sup> Gramsci disputes Croce's interpretation of Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, according to which 'one cannot speak of Marx as a philosopher and therefore one cannot speak of a Marxist philosophy since what Marx proposed was, precisely, to turn philosophy upside down - not just Hegel's philosophy but philosophy as a whole - and to replace philosophizing with practical activity',<sup>19</sup> noting the inconsistency of Croce who earlier, had explicitly recognized 'that Antonio Labriola was justified in pointing out the need to construct a "philosophy of praxis" on the basis of Marxism'.<sup>20</sup> Instead of signifying a repudiation of all philosophy in

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<sup>16</sup> Q 8, 173, 1045.

<sup>17</sup> Q 11, 13, 1396.

<sup>18</sup> Q 8, 198, written in February 1932.

<sup>19</sup> Croce asserted that Marx's "inversion consisted in replacing philosophy with practice and the philosopher with the revolutionary . . . It was not just Hegelian philosophy that Marx turned upside down but philosophy in general, philosophy of any kind; and he replaced philosophizing with practical activity, which for him was in fact nothing other than the revolutionary activity of the proletariat', Croce 1918, "Marxismo e filosofia" in *Conversazioni critiche*, 1<sup>st</sup> series, Bari: Laterza.

<sup>20</sup> Q 8, 198, 1060. Croce had written, in *Materialismo Storico ed Economia Marxistica*, that from the standpoint of the doctrine of knowledge according to Marx, 'one might speak with Labriola of historical materialism as a *philosophy of praxis* . . . as a particular way of conceiving and resolving . . . the problem of thought and being',

favor of revolutionary political praxis, Gramsci indicates that ‘the view, expressed in the *Theses on Feuerbach*, that the philosophers have explained the world and the point now is to change it’, was meant to indicate ‘that philosophy must become “politics” or “practice” in order for it to continue to be philosophy’, in other words, ‘the unity of theory and practice’.<sup>21</sup> The link between Marx’s *Theses*, and the necessity, following Labriola’s own indications, of re-elaborating Marxism as a philosophy of praxis has now become explicit. In particular the eleventh thesis, understood as the affirmation of the unity of theory and practice, interpreting and changing, thought and action, philosophy and politics, is identified as the substrate for the re-elaboration of Marx’s theory as a “philosophy of praxis”, i.e. the theoretical basis in Marx for the equality of, or the equation between, “philosophy and politics,” thought and action, that is, at a philosophy of praxis that Gramsci averred in Q 7, 35.<sup>22</sup>

Furthermore, at this juncture in Gramsci’s prison research, we actually have a concrete sense of what this equalization of thought and action, philosophy and politics, signifies. ‘A philosophy of praxis’, as he argues in the next appearance of the term after Q 8, 198,

must initially adopt a polemical stance, as superseding the existing mode of thinking. It must therefore present itself as a critique of “common sense” (but only after it has based itself on common sense in order to show that “everyone” is a philosopher and that the point is not to introduce a totally new form of knowledge into “everyone’s” individual life but to revitalize an already existing activity and make it “critical”). It must also present itself as a critique of the philosophy of the intellectuals, out of which the history of philosophy arises’.<sup>23</sup>

Or, as we have seen him put it earlier, Marxist philosophy

should have as its point of departure an analysis and a critique of the philosophy of common sense, which is the “philosophy of nonphilosophers” - in other words, the conception of the world *acritically* absorbed from the various social environments in which the moral individuality of the average person is developed.<sup>24</sup>

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explicitly referring to the *Theses*, Labriola’s *Socialism and Philosophy*, and Gentile’s *La Filosofia di Marx*, Croce 1900, 153.

<sup>21</sup> Q 8, 208, 1066.

<sup>22</sup> Significantly, one can note that after, Q 8, 198, the term “philosophy of praxis” reappears with greater frequency in the notes of Notebook 8, before systematically replacing “historical materialism” and “Marxism” in Notebooks 10 and 11.

<sup>23</sup> Q 8, 220, 1080.

<sup>24</sup> Q 8, 173, 1045-6, Q 8, 204, 1063.

Hence, Marxist philosophy must be understood as a critique of common sense, i.e. the “acritically” absorbed “folklore” or “philosophy of nonphilosophers”, the diffuse and fragmentary conceptions of the world of the multitude. It is in this sense that “all men are philosophers”. Everyone “thinks”, possesses some view or conception of the world (a fact which is implicit in the use of language itself), even if ‘in a disjointed and inconsistent manner’. It is a philosophy which is a mass politics, rather than being confined to a narrow coterie of intellectuals, one in which ‘in the course of elaborating a superior and scientifically coherent form of thought, it never fails to remain in contact with the “simple” and even finds in such contacts the source of the issues that need to be studied and resolved’, and further, that ‘Only through this contact does a philosophy become “historical,” cleanse itself of elements that are “individual” in origin, and turn itself into “life”’. It is therefore useful, he continues, to make a “practical” distinction between common sense and philosophy, since the former is ‘the conception of the world that is most widespread among the popular masses in a historical period’, while the latter, aims ‘to change common sense and create a “new common sense” - hence the need to take the “simple” into account’.<sup>25</sup>

In other words, although all philosophy is implicitly a politics, that is, a practical intervention into a determinate cultural and ideological terrain in order to influence the popular, common sense forms of consciousness prevalent in a particular society, it is evident that Marxism, as a “philosophy of praxis”, has a distinctive relation to common sense. It does not attempt to ‘influence the popular masses as an external political force, an element of cohesive force exercised by the ruling classes and therefore an element of subordination to an external hegemony’.<sup>26</sup> Rather, it is a philosophy that situates itself in an organic and integral relation with the needs, views, feelings, and ways of life of the popular classes, finding its analytical basis and point of departure in the latter precisely in order to elevate that consciousness to a higher level. The philosophy of praxis is therefore, (still only implicitly) the “immanent” critique of common sense, i.e. that philosophy which does not attempt to present itself as transcendent to the practices it seeks to comprehend, but contrarily, one which self-consciously has ‘as its point of departure an analysis and a critique of the philosophy of common sense, the philosophy of nonphilosophers’, one in which, ‘in the course of elaborating a superior and scientifically coherent form of thought, it never fails to remain in contact with the “simple” and even finds in such contacts the source of the issues that need to be studied and resolved’.

As in the earlier appearances of the term, implicit in the concept of Marxism as a “philosophy of praxis” lies the notion of a distinctive form of theorizing and knowing practically and politically from a particular class standpoint within the field of struggle itself. From the early thesis of historical materialism

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<sup>25</sup> Q 8, 213, 1070-1.

<sup>26</sup> Q 11, 13, 1396.

as a “philosophy of the act (praxis)” in the profane sense, in which as a theory, it does not deny the reality of contradiction and strife, but instead, takes this struggle as its analytical point of departure, consciously seeing itself as an element within it, and thus, as a partial and practical form of theorizing within the struggle (fall 1930), this conception re-appeared in reference to Machiavelli, and in clear connection with an alternative, non-metaphysical concept of immanence. As we have seen, Gramsci argued that the latter repudiated all elements of transcendence, basing his theory on the concrete, practical and political terrain of effective reality or the relations of force, and moreover he did so as a partisan, i.e. an active man of politics and passions (winter 1930). In early 1931, the idea found a formulation in the thesis of ‘the equality of, or the equation between, “philosophy and politics,” thought and action, that is, at a philosophy of praxis’, as the delineation of a conception that rethinks philosophy in a concrete way departing from the primacy of politics, in short, the concrete unity of theory and practice, philosophy and politics understood within the framework of hegemony, as a philosophical conception of the world of a determinate social class that wants to found a state. Now, in early 1932, Gramsci has concretized this idea in the conception of Marxism as a philosophical of praxis that takes the form of a critique of common sense, organically basing itself on the life and thought of the popular masses in order to give coherent form and expression to their historically vital needs and interests. It represents, in other words, a form of theorizing and knowing practically and politically within the arena of hegemonic struggle itself, more precisely in an active, reciprocal, and dialectical pedagogical relation with the life and consciousness of the popular classes which form its concrete basis and which, as a philosophy whose function is to become a conception of the world of the masses, it strives to coherently articulate.

Such a conception of philosophy could legitimately be regarded as the theorization, or “rendering explicit” of the perspective enunciated back in 1930, in which Gramsci’s judgments concerning the achievements of the Turin communists in the factory council movement prefigured in many ways the elaboration of the philosophy of praxis in Notebook 8. As we have seen, far from neglecting or dismissing the views and fragmented conceptions of the masses, the Turin leadership placed itself in an active pedagogical relationship to the popular subaltern classes, ‘to real people in specific historical relations’, whose opinions and sentiments were ‘educated’ and ‘given a direction’, in the sense that ‘It gave the masses a “theoretical” consciousness of themselves” as active historical agents. These judgments already implied an understanding of the role of Marxist theory, redefined in terms of its active relation with the views and ways of life of the popular classes as part of a mass politics. Just as a philosophy of praxis, as Gramsci elaborated it in early 1932, does not conceive of itself as transcendent or external to the common sense conceptions of the masses, but instead, as (implicitly) an immanent act of philosophical critique, so he had argued in 1930

that Marxist theory cannot be in fundamental opposition to ‘the “spontaneous” sentiments of the masses (“spontaneous” in the sense that they are not due to the systematic educational activity of an already conscious leadership but have been formed through everyday experience in the light of “common sense”, that is, the traditional popular conception of the world)’. Instead, ‘there is, between the two, a “quantitative” difference - of degree not of quality; it should be possible to have a reciprocal “reduction” so to speak, a passage from one to the other and vice versa.’<sup>27</sup>

Or, as he put it in Notebook 8, one could make a “practical” (i.e. “quantitative”) distinction between common sense and philosophy, since the former is ‘the conception of the world that is most widespread among the popular masses in a historical period’, while the latter, aims ‘to change common sense and create a “new common sense” - hence the need to take the “simple” into account’.<sup>28</sup> Thus, it is probably not a mere coincidence that Gramsci’s assessment of the Turin leadership was contemporaneous with the theses laid out in early Notebook 4 regarding Marx’s new philosophical construction. It is however, in Notebook 8 that Gramsci’s decisive “breakthrough” can be located, in which these earlier insights and intuitions were fused with an explicit program of redefining philosophy in its integral relation with common sense, as a “philosophy of praxis”.

### 3.3.1 The unity of theory and practice as a relation of translation

The distinctive dialectical nexus between thought and action, philosophy and politics, designated by the term “philosophy of praxis” is in fact, as previously intimated, understood in terms of the notion of “translatability” introduced in the last chapter. Significantly, Gramsci recalled Marx’s passage from *The Holy Family* immediately after he had written of the “quantitative” difference - of degree not of quality’, i.e. the ‘reciprocal “reduction”’, or ‘passage from one to the other and vice versa’, that characterized the relation between theory and masses, the Turin leadership and popular common sense conceptions. Moreover, the language of “reciprocal reduction” resembles that used in other passages in which Gramsci described the concept of translatability. The relation between French politics and German philosophy, as we have seen, ‘are *interchangeable*: each one is reducible to the other; they are mutually translatable’.<sup>29</sup> That being said, it is crucial which term in the dyad - theory or practice, philosophy or politics, constitutes the starting point and point of arrival in the mutually reciprocal relation of translatability. As Gramsci

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<sup>27</sup> Q 3, 48, 330-1.

<sup>28</sup> Q 8, 213, 1070-1.

<sup>29</sup> Q 4, 42, 467-8.

immediately adds in the just cited passage, ‘One is really superior to the other’.<sup>30</sup> Thus, at the end of Q 3, 48, he writes that ‘reality is teeming with the most bizarre coincidences, and it is the theoretician’s task to find in this bizarreness new evidence for his theory, to “translate” the elements of historical life into theoretical language, but not vice versa, making reality conform to an abstract scheme. Reality will never conform to an abstract scheme’.<sup>31</sup> As Labriola said, ‘from life to thought, not from thought to life;’ is the realistic process for a philosophy of praxis genuinely immanent in the concrete sense to the reality about which it philosophizes. The concrete world, in all its complexity, variety, and particularity must form the point of departure and arrival for theory, the latter “translating” the former into theoretical terms, and not vice versa. It is the practical political terrain that constitutes the basis for the work of theoretical translation. In this sense, the leadership of the Turin movement ‘was not an “abstract” leadership . . . it did not confuse politics - real action - with theoretical disquisition’.<sup>32</sup>

This notion of translatability was, as previously discussed, an important dimension underlying Q 4, 45, and Q 7, 35, in which the reciprocal translatability between theory and practice, philosophy and politics, was operative in the double sense indicated earlier, that is as involving a critical destructive part as well as a positive element of re-appropriation and fundamental transformation, as the speculative concepts of traditional philosophy were critically translated into their practical, political, and ideological dimensions, at the same time that they were radically reconstituted and transformed departing from the primacy of politics and the terrain of hegemonic struggle.

It is in terms of this conception of translatability that Gramsci understands Marx’s eleventh thesis. As we have seen, far from a rejection of philosophy *tout court*, the former claimed that ‘the view, expressed in the *Theses on Feuerbach*, that the philosophers have explained the world and the point now is to change it’, was meant to indicate ‘that philosophy must become “politics” or “practice” in order for it to continue to be philosophy’, in other words, ‘the unity of theory and practice’.<sup>33</sup> Thus, it represents not the abandonment and liquidation of the whole of philosophy, but instead its critical “translation” and fundamental reformulation into the terms of politics.<sup>34</sup> In this note, it is not only Marx’s passage from *The*

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 468.

<sup>31</sup> Q 3, 48, 332.

<sup>32</sup> Q 3, 48, 330.

<sup>33</sup> Q 8, 208, 1066.

<sup>34</sup> Gramsci’s translation of the eleventh thesis was done strategically in order to support this interpretation. Engels rendered Marx’s closing line as ‘The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it’, CW: 5: 8. Engels’ insertion of the word “however” (not in Marx’s original version) could perhaps be read as the suggestion of a mutually exclusive relationship between interpreting and changing, philosophy and politics, thus reinforcing Croce’s interpretation. In contrast, Gramsci translated it as ‘The philosophers have only interpreted the world in different ways; it is now time to change it’, hence that philosophy now has to become practical and political, Q 2357.

*Holy Family* that is identified as the source for the notion of the translatability between theory and practice, philosophy and politics. Taking his cue from an article written by Croce,<sup>35</sup> Gramsci locates the origins of the comparison further back to Hegel's *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* and *The Philosophy of History*, claiming that these passages from Hegel are important 'as the "source" of the view, expressed in the *Theses on Feuerbach*, that the philosophers have explained the world and the point now is to change it', i.e. 'that philosophy must become "politics" or "practice" in order for it to continue to be philosophy. The "source", then, of the theory of the unity of theory and practice'.<sup>36</sup> Gramsci further adds that it was not only in *The Holy Family* that Marx made the comparison, but also in the "Introduction" to the *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*.<sup>37</sup>

In short, in Gramsci's reading there is an integral link between Marx's eleventh thesis, as the explicit theoretical nucleus for the reconstruction of Marxism as a philosophy of praxis, and *The Holy Family*, the "Introduction" to the *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, and the famous closing line of Engels's *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, a link which orbits around the principle of translatability purportedly discovered by Hegel. The dialectical nexus between the philosophy of praxis and common sense is grasped as a relation of mutual or reciprocal translation between theory and practice, philosophy and politics, intellectuals and masses, and in which the latter term in each of these binaries represents the starting point and point of arrival.

### 3.4 The critique of Croce

Significantly, it was around this same time, in the early months of 1932, in which Gramsci was pursuing the reformulation of philosophy in relation to common sense in the third series of "Notes on Philosophy", that he was also beginning to lay the foundations of a sustained critique of the speculative character of Croce's philosophical thought in Notebook 8, and pursued intensively in Notebook 10. Early on in the Notebooks, Gramsci had sketched a basic perspective from which to assess Croce's theoretical activity. If Gentile's reaction to the world war and the ensuing organic crisis of bourgeois hegemony consisted in the development of an activist philosophy (actual idealism) in which the real and ideal, practice and theory, ideology and philosophy, were absolutely identified in the pure act, Croce reacted to

<sup>35</sup> "La preistoria di un paragone", in *Conversazioni critiche*, Bari: Laterza, 1918, 292-4, which Gramsci had in Turi.

<sup>36</sup> Q 8, 208, 1066.

<sup>37</sup> Gramsci is alluding to Marx's statement that 'In politics, the Germans *thought* what other nations *did*. Germany was their *theoretical consciousness*', CW: 3: 181.



the same historical convulsions in the opposite direction; he tenaciously resisted the ‘degradation of traditional philosophy’, in which, ‘during the war “ideology and philosophy” were entering ‘into a frenetic union’. Croce’s struggle to maintain a distinction between theory and practice, philosophy and ideology, was done with a keen awareness ‘that all movements of modern thought lead to a triumphal revaluation of historical materialism, that is to the overthrow of the question of philosophy from its traditional position and to the death of philosophy in the traditional sense’. He ‘resists this pressure of historical reality with all his might, and with an exceptional understanding of the dangers and of the dialectical means with which to prevent them’.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, despite Croce’s efforts, Gramsci had clearly perceived that, ‘In Croce, philosophy and “ideology” finally become one, and philosophy reveals itself to be nothing other than a “practical instrument” for organization and action’. Hence, ‘Croce believes that his work is “pure science”, pure “history”, pure “philosophy”, whereas it is really “ideology”; he offers practical instruments of action to specific political groups, and he is astonished that these are not “understood” as “pure science”’.<sup>39</sup>

### 3.4.1 Croce’s historicism

In Notebook 8, Gramsci reactivates these perspectives, with the crucial difference that now, in early 1932, he is armed with his own positive conception of a way of conceiving and practicing philosophy as a philosophy of praxis, thus giving him a vantage point from which to critique the more fundamental philosophical presuppositions underlying Croce’s historicism. The latter’s attempt to present his thought as an ‘objective science’, a ‘serene and impartial thought perched above the miseries and contingencies of quotidian struggle, a disinterested contemplation of the endless unfolding of human history’,<sup>40</sup> found its philosophical foundations in his revision of Hegel’s dialectic of opposites in favor of one of distinctions. Hegel’s *Geist*, in order to arrive at a state of full perfection must first undergo a historical development in which it embodies itself in partial and imperfect forms, its universality and infinitude alienated in the finite forms of particularity in which it incarnates itself over the course of its historical self-development. Hence, Hegel’s spirit is only truly such, in all of its fullness and self-perfection, after passing through a dialectical process in which its true essence is alienated in opposite and opposed, incomplete manifestations. For Croce, such a conception was tainted by a metaphysical dualism

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<sup>38</sup> Q 1, 132, 119-20 (February -March 1930).

<sup>39</sup> Q 6, 10, 690, Q 6, 112, 782.

<sup>40</sup> Q 8, 39, 966.

between the particular, finite forms in which spirit fractured itself, and its true universal essence, such that the latter was compromised, and thus, not truly universal and fully immanent in the world. In contrast to this conception, as Frosini explicates, Croce proposed the idea that

Spirit does not have, because it cannot tolerate, anything exterior to itself. It is thus always perfect and complete in each of its particular forms, in each of its incarnations. These are therefore not really “surmounted” in others, but they articulate and connect historically, always conserving however their own autonomy and perfection in themselves. This is possible because the level of history is one thing and that of logic is another. Struggle and opposition take place on the first, but it is never such as to co-involve the categories themselves that render such struggle comprehensible. The struggle between forms of life . . . does not amount to the logical supersession of one phase of Spirit by another, but in each particular moment, whatever the empirical reality represented by it, all of Spirit is contained . . . in *all* of its forms . . . Spirit is always *complete* in each expression, and therefore any of these *is simultaneously itself and all the others* . . . it can be all the others because . . . it is, fundamentally and *distinctly*, itself.<sup>41</sup>

For Hegel then, not only the empirical historical world, but also the logical philosophical concepts through which spirit comprehends its own immanence in the world, are subjected to a dialectical movement of fractures and contradictions, whereas for Croce, spirit is always completely immanent, in its universal wholeness and self-perfection, in the historical world.<sup>42</sup> The latter thus averred that his thought comprised a genuine “absolute historicism” insofar as ‘there was an immanent unity of philosophy and history, and that his philosophy was the first to recognize fully philosophy’s constitution as the thought of history, and not the thought of some beyond’,<sup>43</sup> successfully overcoming the metaphysical dualism into which the Hegelian system had allegedly collapsed. Croce believes he has successfully overcome metaphysics by securing the full unity of philosophy with history, in which the former takes as its objects the real problems arising out of the latter, rather than some transcendental, metaphysical beyond.

### 3.4.2 Croce’s immanence

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<sup>41</sup> Frosini 2003, 126-7.

<sup>42</sup> As Yovel writes, for Hegel God is ‘made the product of a process in time (namely, of the self-actualization of spirit through human history). Rather than being absolute and eternal from the outset, God . . . emerges in Hegel as the outcome of a dialectical process of self-constitution and self-mediation’, Yovel 1989, 33.

<sup>43</sup> Thomas 2010, 268.

He therefore located his philosophical conception on the plane of genuine immanence. Croce's immanence, intimately related to his historicism, is articulated around the idea of the "pure concept". Expounding upon the latter, he writes that

A true and proper concept, precisely because it is not representation, cannot have for content any single representative element, or have reference to any particular representation, or group of representations; but on the other hand, precisely because it is universal in relation to the individuality of the representations, it must refer at the same time to all and to each.<sup>44</sup>

The content and meaning of genuine concepts cannot be exhausted by any number of representations, but rather, must be transcendent, and therefore, universal in relation to the representation or set of representations to which they refer:

Its universality is peculiar to the concept; that is to say, its transcendence in relation to the single representations, so that no single representation and no number of them can be equivalent to the concept . . . A concept which has been proved not universal, is, by that very fact, confuted as a concept.<sup>45</sup>

On the other hand, though pure concepts are transcendent and thus, universal in relation to the realm of being and representations, they must, at the same time, be related and connected to them in some way, otherwise they would be transcendental, metaphysical, and other-worldly in relation to the world of representations, and therefore, non-immanent.<sup>46</sup>

Pure concepts are both universal and concrete, transcendent and immanent to reality. They must be universal and transcendent with respect to representations. At the same time, pure concepts must also be concrete, and thus, immanent to representations. As he contends, 'If it is proved of a concept that it is inapplicable to reality, and therefore is not concrete, it is thereby confuted as a true and proper concept. It is said to be an *abstraction*, it is not reality; it does not possess *concreteness*'.<sup>47</sup>

Thus, pure, concrete universal concepts are immanent to being, that is, the realm of representations. These pure concepts, as the various modes of articulation of spirit, are implicitly contained in, and thus, necessarily bound up with being. Since the transcendent universality of true concepts is also, at the same time, their immanence,<sup>48</sup> Croce, as he sees it, thus avoids a relapse into

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<sup>44</sup> Croce 1917, 20.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. 41.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 43.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 43-44.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. 45.

metaphysical, speculative, and other-wordly transcendentalism by securing a unity between being and thought, the world of representations and the pure concepts constitutive of spirit, the object and subject of knowledge. Thus, he can conclude that,

In this way, has been confuted the concept of spirit as different from nature (abstract spiritualism); or of the good, as a model placed above the real world . . . since there is neither a reality that is merely natural and external to spirit, nor an ideal world outside of the real world.<sup>49</sup>

Being and thought, the material and the ideal, are thus fused and synthesized in the Crocean concept of immanence. The pure concepts, as the distinct, but at the same time, united modalities of spirit, arise ‘upon the many-colored pageant of representations, intuitions, or sensations, whichever we may call them; and by means of these, at every moment the cognitive spirit absorbs within itself the course of reality, bestowing upon it theoretic form’.<sup>50</sup> Or, as he puts it elsewhere, the pure concept ‘springs from representations, as something implicit in them that must become explicit; a necessity whose premises they provide’.<sup>51</sup> In other words, the pure conceptual ideals constitutive of spirit can only arise and develop on the basis of reality, thereby differentiating Croce’s conception from post-Kantian German idealist notions. Nevertheless, as Croce indicates in the passages quoted above, the pure concepts are already implicit in representations, as the means by which “cognitive spirit” ‘absorbs within itself the course of reality, bestowing upon it theoretic form’. Reality gets subsumed and enveloped by the pure logical concepts in which spirit articulates and develops itself, a conception which closely resembles prior metaphysical notions of immanence in which being and thought are united through the synthetic and constitutive activity of the latter. As Thomas argues, the pure concept is

immanent to representations because, in truth, they were already present in them, as their originary ground and finally revealed truth: a classic idealist proposition in which thought is “immanent” to – dwelling or remaining within . . . being. For Gramsci, this notion of immanence remained trapped within the problematic of “speculation” determining the pre-Marxian concept of immanence in which thought could reflect reality because it was in truth reflecting itself.<sup>52</sup>

### 3.4.3 The speculative character of Croce’s thought

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid. 44.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. 4.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. 18.

<sup>52</sup> Thomas 2010, 344.

Just as the pure logical concepts constitutive of spirit are supposed to be immanent and concrete to the extent that they arise on the basis of real life, and yet, are also transcendent and universal in relation to the practical world as its effective forms of comprehension (and precisely on this basis, constitute genuine knowledge of the finite realm of particularity), so in Croce's historicism, the philosophical categories are supposed to arise on the basis of the concrete problems posed by historical development, and yet implicitly remain detached and autonomous from the historical events themselves as the adequate forms of their conceptual and theoretical comprehension. In this way, Croce manages to preserve the traditional conception of philosophy as a disinterested pursuit of truth, 'a "higher", speculative form of knowledge of the Real, purified of practical distractions':

The concept (theory) emerges from representations (ideology) as their critique, offering the only genuine form of knowledge as opposed to the lived relations reflected by its antecedents. Insofar as knowledge is constituted only in the concept (in theory), it is autonomous and possesses its own temporality, which is not the same as that of those things that it comprehends. Metaphysics is here restored at the very moment it is denied; thought can at best reflect history in the sense of a speculum (more or less accurately, depending upon the "purity" of the concept), but it cannot participate in it and its fundamental "logical" structure is not altered by it.<sup>53</sup>

Indeed, this was precisely the charge brought against Croce's historicism by Gramsci, the latter arguing that, despite his attempts to expunge every residue of theology and metaphysics from his philosophy,

isn't every "speculative" philosophy itself a theology and metaphysics? This "residue" is not a residue, it is "whole"; it is the whole method of doing philosophy and therefore every affirmation of "historicism" is hollow, since it is nothing more than speculative "historicism", the "concept" of history rather than history.<sup>54</sup>

Despite his claims to the contrary, Croce's historicism remains abstract, metaphysical, and speculative since the philosophical categories by means of which the historical process is theoretically comprehended are nevertheless ultimately separate and detached from the real historical process itself. As Gramsci rhetorically asks, 'in the process of becoming, does he see the becoming itself or the "concept" of becoming'? He continues that,

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid. 268-9.

<sup>54</sup> Q 8, 224, 1081-2. Contemporaneously with this accusation, Gramsci declared that 'All historicist theories of a speculative character have to be reexamined and criticized', stressing the need, in this context, for an "Anti-Croce", Q 8, 235, 1088. See also Q 10, I, 8, 1225.

If, in the perennial flux of events, it is necessary to establish concepts without which reality cannot be understood, it is also necessary, in fact it is indispensable, to establish and remember that reality in motion and the concept of reality, though they may be logically distinct, must be conceived historically as an inseparable unit. Otherwise there happens what is happening to Croce, that history becomes a formal history, a history of concepts.<sup>55</sup>

#### 3.4.4 Translating Croce's speculative thought into the terms of hegemony

As earlier pointed out, Gramsci had already recognized, in late 1930, that despite his struggle against the “frenetic union” between philosophy and ideology, ‘In Croce, philosophy and “ideology” finally become one, and philosophy reveals itself to be nothing other than a “practical instrument” for organization and action’.<sup>56</sup> Now, in the spring of 1932, Gramsci begins to solidify this understanding of Croce's thought, within a broader conception of philosophy as a whole. After identifying the speculative character of Croce's historicism, Gramsci asks,<sup>57</sup> ‘whether the “speculative” element is a characteristic of every philosophy or else is a phase in the development of philosophical thought, along the lines of the general process of development of a given historical period’. He goes on to aver

that every culture has its speculative or religious moment that coincides with the period of complete hegemony of the social group of which the culture is an expression. And perhaps it even coincides with the moment in which the real hegemony disintegrates while the system of thought perfects and refines itself - which is what happens in periods of decadence. Criticism resolves speculation into its real terms of ideology.<sup>58</sup>

Speculative philosophy is explicitly translated into its real terms as a theoretical moment corresponding to the consolidation of the hegemony of a social group, and perhaps, even to the point at which this hegemony reaches its apex and begins to deteriorate.

Gramsci pursues and further deepens this critical understanding of philosophy, particularly with respect to Croce's speculative historicism, reducing it to its real terms as an element of politics, ideology, and hegemony in the first part of Notebook 10, commenced at the same time that Gramsci was finishing

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<sup>55</sup> Q 10, II, 1, 1240-1.

<sup>56</sup> Q 6, 10, 690, written just after Q 4, 45.

<sup>57</sup> In a note significantly entitled, “Introduction to the history of philosophy. Speculative philosophy”.

<sup>58</sup> Q 8, 238, 1090.

his last notes of the third series in Notebook 8.<sup>59</sup> Reflecting on Croce's conception of the identity of history and philosophy, Gramsci writes,

Croce's proposition regarding the identity of history and philosophy is richer than any other in critical consequences: 1) it remains incomplete if it does not also arrive at the identity of history and politics . . . and 2) thus also at the identity of politics and philosophy. But if it is necessary to admit of this identity, how can one any longer distinguish ideologies (equivalent, according to Croce, to instruments of political action) from philosophy?<sup>60</sup>

That history is fundamentally political recalls the conceptual framework expounded earlier in chapter two. As we have seen, for Gramsci, reality is essentially a terrain of struggle and contradiction, and precisely because of this, is necessarily historical, i.e. the historical movement of the ensemble of social relations through a dialectic of class contradictions and antagonisms, or historical becoming in a "Concordia discors".<sup>61</sup> 'Reality' is 'struggle and contradiction', 'the dialectic' of 'historical becoming'.<sup>62</sup>

But Croce's ethico-political conception of history as the pacific expansion of liberty obscured this fact. In the miscellaneous notes from Notebook 8,<sup>63</sup> Gramsci had already contested the purported status of this historicist conception as an 'objective science', a 'serene and impartial thought perched above the miseries and contingencies of quotidian struggle, a disinterested contemplation of the endless unfolding of human history', by linking it to political and ideological tendencies which had emerged in the context of the Italian Risorgimento, in particular, those representatives of passive revolution, i.e. 'the concepts of "passive revolution", "revolution-restoration", "conservation-innovation".<sup>64</sup> These categories

express the historical fact that popular initiative is missing from the development of Italian history, as well as the fact that "progress" occurs as the reaction of the dominant classes to the sporadic and incoherent rebelliousness of the popular masses - a reaction consisting of "restorations" that agree to some part of the popular demands and are therefore "progressive restorations", or "revolution-restorations", or even "passive revolutions".<sup>65</sup>

Or as we saw him describe it earlier, these concepts apply not only to Italy, but also 'to those other countries that modernize the state through a series of reforms or national wars without undergoing a

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<sup>59</sup> April-May 1932.

<sup>60</sup> Q 10, II, 2, 1241.

<sup>61</sup> Q 7, 35, 885, Q 10, II, 4, 1243.

<sup>62</sup> Q 10, II, 41 (xii), 1320, written in the summer of 1932.

<sup>63</sup> Written between January and April 1932.

<sup>64</sup> Q 8, 39, 966.

<sup>65</sup> Q 8, 25, 957.

political revolution of a radical-Jacobin type'.<sup>66</sup> It is this aversion to the popular initiatives of the masses in history, to any radical, national-popular revolutionary political movement of the Jacobin type, that typifies Croce's moderate historicism, 'a practico-political or ideological tendency' committed to a view of historical development as a dialectic of conservation and innovation, in which historical innovation conserves the past, and in which radical historical ruptures that do not simply conserve the past, but introduce historically novel elements, such as Jacobinism, remain utterly incomprehensible, and are considered therefore, as irrational.<sup>67</sup>

This partial, ideological form of historicism was clearly on display in Croce's historiographical work, particularly in his *History of Europe in the Nineteenth Century*, whose ideological "trick" was to commence 'his historical narrative from after the fall of Napoleon', thus excluding the violent struggles and mass movements of the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars.<sup>68</sup> Analogously, his *History of Italy* took the year 1871 as its starting point, thus excluding the struggles of the Risorgimento. As Gramsci asks rhetorically,

This underlying core of Croce's historicism, its 'blind fear of Jacobin movements, of any active intervention by the great popular masses as a factor of social progress', reveals its ideological status as a 'unilateral practico-political tendency',<sup>69</sup> a tendentious refusal to acknowledge historical reality as a real political terrain of struggle, force, and opposition, which Gramsci links to a speculative mutilation of Hegelianism, a type of conservative domestication of Hegelian dialectics embodied in the historical notion of conservation-innovation, passive revolution, or revolution-restoration, in which the thesis is "preserved" in the antithesis, whereas 'In history as it really is the antithesis tends to destroy the thesis, the synthesis that emerges being a supersession'.<sup>70</sup> Although, as argued earlier, Gramsci drew on several Marxian texts in order to form a perspective of reality as fundamentally political, a historical and social terrain of class contradictions, it is *The Poverty of Philosophy* that becomes the central point of reference as Gramsci pursues this critique of Croce in the spring and summer of 1932. Just as Marx defended Hegel's concept of dialectics as a contradictory conflict between opposites and their supersession in a new synthesis against Proudhon's reduction of Hegelian dialectics to a distinction between a *good side* and a *bad side*, and the attempt to preserve the advantages of the former while eliminating the disadvantages of the latter,<sup>71</sup> so Gramsci redeploys this argument in order to link Croce's speculative

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<sup>66</sup> Q 4, 57, 504.

<sup>67</sup> Q 8, 27, 957-8.

<sup>68</sup> Q 8, 236, 1088.

<sup>69</sup> Q 8, 27, 958.

<sup>70</sup> Q 10, I, 6, 1220-1.

<sup>71</sup> CW: 6: 164-9.



attempt to have the thesis “preserved” in the antithesis to the logic of passive revolution or “revolution-restoration”, in short, ‘a tempered reformist conservatism’. For Gramsci, ‘such a way of conceiving the Hegelian dialectic is typical of the intellectuals’, who conceive themselves as neutral ‘arbiters and mediators of real political struggles’, above the fray of immediate passions and interests.<sup>72</sup> But this theoretical “incomprehension” of the dialectic, as he later clarified,

expressed in practice the necessity for the “thesis” to achieve its full development, up to the point where it would even succeed in incorporating a part of the antithesis itself - in order, that is, not to allow itself to be “transcended” in the dialectical opposition. The thesis alone in fact develops to the full its potential for struggle, up to the point where it absorbs even the so-called representatives of the antithesis: it is precisely in this that the passive revolution or revolution-restoration consists.<sup>73</sup>

Building on his earlier analyses from Notebook 1, in which the translation of French revolutionary politics into the speculative terms of German classical philosophy was identified with the Restoration period reaction to the Jacobin form of hegemony, permitting the ‘bourgeoisie to attain power without massive disturbances’, Gramsci translates Croce’s speculative historiography into the terms of the absorptive logic of passive revolution, ‘the Restoration reborn and adapted to the needs and interests of the actual period’.<sup>74</sup> As Frosini argues, the speculative “incomprehension” of the dialectic is not the basis of an incapacity to act, but on the contrary, the source of a political efficacy.<sup>75</sup>

Croce thus denied that history is a terrain of struggle and contradiction precisely because this would have lead to ‘the identification of history and politics, and thus of ideology and philosophy’.<sup>76</sup> As we have already seen, so long as reality is fundamentally a terrain of conflict and scission, the entire field of thought and relations of knowledge, and therefore, philosophy itself, cannot but be practical, political, and hence, ideologically overdetermined.

Continuing his critical analysis of Croce’s presentation of the history of Europe as one of expanding liberty, Gramsci argues that ‘a current and party, going under the specific name of liberal, were created and they used the speculative and contemplative position of Hegelian philosophy to construct an unmediated political ideology, a practical instrument of domination and social hegemony, a means for

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<sup>72</sup> Q 10, I, 6, 1220-2. Also, Q 8, 225, Q 9, 97, Q 10, II, 41 (xiv), Q 15, 36.

<sup>73</sup> Q 15, 11, 1768.

<sup>74</sup> Q 10, I, 6, 1220.

<sup>75</sup> Frosini 2008, 738.

<sup>76</sup> Q 10, II, 2, 1241-2.

conserving particular political and economic institutions'.<sup>77</sup> Hegel's philosophy of history as one of the growth of the consciousness of freedom had become a mere "conceptual shell" beneath which lay determinate social groups for whom the conceptual veil had a concrete power and utility. Liberty served as a religion, in Croce's sense as a conception of the world with a corresponding ethic or norm of conduct, for the ruling group of intellectuals, while for the masses who are ruled and governed, it assumed the appearance of an ideological amalgam, of fanaticism and superstition, a state of affairs that the ruling group sought to perpetuate, in a similar way to the Catholic Church.<sup>78</sup> According to Gramsci, this demonstrates that

Even from his own standpoint . . . Croce is incapable of maintaining that distinction between "philosophy" and "ideology", between "religion" and "superstition" that is essential to his way of thinking and to his polemic against the philosophy of praxis. He thinks he is dealing with a philosophy and he is instead dealing with an ideology . . . he thinks he is writing a history from which every element of class has been exorcised and he is, instead, producing a highly accurate and praiseworthy description of the political masterpiece whereby a particular class manages to present and have the conditions for its existence and development as a class accepted as a universal principle, as a worldview, as a religion. In other words he is describing in the very act the development of a practical means of government and domination.<sup>79</sup>

### 3.5 Philosophy as hegemony (catharsis)

Croce's failure to insulate philosophy, as the disinterested and impartial comprehension of history, from the real practical political struggles of history, and hence, ideology, 'equivalent, according to Croce, to instruments of political action',<sup>80</sup> leads Gramsci towards a general definition of philosophy in relation to ideology:

After first distinguishing philosophy from ideology, he has finished up by confusing a political ideology with a world view, thereby demonstrating in practice that the distinction is impossible and that it is not two categories that are being dealt with but the same historical one, the distinction in it being solely one of degree. One can call philosophy the world view that

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<sup>77</sup> Q 10, I, 10, 1229-30.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid. 1230-31.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid. 1231.

<sup>80</sup> Q 10, II, 2, 1241.

represents the moral and intellectual life (the catharsis of a particular practical life) of an entire social group, considered dynamically and thus seen not only in its current and unmediated interests but also in its future and mediated ones; while one can call ideology each particular conception of the class's internal groupings, who aim at aiding the resolution of immediate and restricted problems.<sup>81</sup>

This seminal formulation presupposes the dilated, gnoseological conception of ideology elucidated in the second chapter, in which Marx's second thesis became, in Gramsci's re-reading, the theoretical nucleus for a reconstitution of the traditional categories of truth and knowledge *within* the space of ideology; the entire terrain of human consciousness and knowledge is necessarily practically, politically, and ideologically overdetermined, with the consequence that there is no longer any fundamental, qualitative distinction between truth and falsity, ideological and non-ideological (or scientific). Rather, there can only be quantitative distinctions between different modes of consciousness according to their varying degrees of practical political power (truth) *within* the ideological terrain. Truth and knowledge are identified with their varying degrees of practical efficacy on the ideological terrain of political struggle, and in the last analysis, with hegemony, since the gnoseological value of ideology means that hegemony too is gnoseological.

Gramsci now fuses this framework with an explicit, general redefinition of philosophy. In accordance with his re-reading of the second thesis on Feuerbach, the truth, i.e. reality and power of all philosophy is not located on a transcendent plane in relation to the political and ideological terrain; on the contrary, it finds its concrete ground in the real or effective relations of political and class struggle, hence on a *continuum* with ideology, distinguishable from the latter only according to its degree of effectiveness and expansivity from the standpoint of hegemony.<sup>82</sup> In the above passage, this way of reformulating philosophy is inscribed within the concrete political terrain of "effective reality", i.e. of hegemonic struggle between conflicting relations of forces that forms the locus of Gramsci's political ontology of the social body. Ideology corresponds to the most rudimentary level of consciousness of internal class fractions, each 'conception of the class's internal groupings, who aim at aiding the resolution of immediate and restricted problems', while philosophy, evidently considered to be, itself, part of the realm of the ideological, nevertheless represents a higher, more coherent conception of the world that has moved beyond ideology in terms of degree. Philosophy embraces and incorporates ideological forms of consciousness - the conception of a social group seen *not only* in its current, unmediated interests, but *also* in its future and mediated ones (mediated by the interests of other subordinate social groups to which

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<sup>81</sup> Q 10, I, 10, 1231.

<sup>82</sup> Liguori 2004, 146, Frosini 2003, 91.

certain non-fundamental concessions need to be made in order for a hegemonic set of class alliances to be secured).<sup>83</sup> Yet, it moves beyond the ideological consciousness of limited and partial economic interests towards more general, far-reaching moral, intellectual, and cultural ones, ‘the clear-cut transition from the structure to complex superstructures’, or as he puts in the above passage, the “catharsis” of an entire social group. Expounding upon the latter, he wrote,

the term “catharsis” can be employed to indicate the passage from the purely economic (or -passional) to the ethico-political moment, that is the superior elaboration of the structure into the superstructure in the minds of men. This also means the passage from “objective to subjective” and from “necessity to freedom”. Structure ceases to be an external force which crushes man, assimilates him to itself and makes him passive; and is transformed into a means of freedom, an instrument to create a new ethico-political form and a source of new initiatives. To establish the “cathartic” moment becomes therefore, it seems to me, the starting-point for all the philosophy of praxis.<sup>84</sup>

Evidently, the “cathartic” moment corresponds to the highest or maximum degree of ‘homogeneity and self-consciousness attained by the various social groups’ at the level of the political relation of forces, in which there is a recognition that one’s own economic-corporate class interests must ascend beyond these confines, becoming the interests of other subordinate groups:

This is the most patently “political” phase, which marks the clear-cut transition from the structure to complex superstructures; it is the phase in which previously germinated ideologies come into contact and confrontation with one another, until one of them - or, at least, a single combination of them - tends to prevail, to dominate, to spread across the entire field, bringing about, in addition to economic and political unity, intellectual and moral unity, not on a corporate but on a universal level: the hegemony of a fundamental social group over the subordinate groups.<sup>85</sup>

In short, Gramsci redefines philosophy as the conception of the world of a determinate social group that has transcended a merely passive, subaltern form of economic-corporate consciousness, thereby becoming capable of consolidating itself as a hegemonic class. Philosophy is closely integrated

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<sup>83</sup> As Gramsci explained, ‘the fact of hegemony presupposes that the interests and tendencies of those groups over whom hegemony is exercised have been taken into account and that a certain equilibrium is established. It presupposes, in other words, that the hegemonic group should make sacrifices of an economic-corporate kind; these sacrifices, however, cannot touch the essential; since hegemony is political but also and above all economic; it has its material base in the decisive function exercised by the hegemonic group in the decisive nucleus of economic activity’, Q 4, 38, 461.

<sup>84</sup> Q 10, II, 6, 1244.

<sup>85</sup> Q 4, 38, 457-8.

with ideology, and the former is, like the latter, constituted politically and historically within determinate ensembles of social relations or, more precisely, the terrain of competing and antagonistic relations of social and political forces, and in which philosophy emerges as the most effective and rationalized comprehension of these struggles in comparison with ideologies, the former representing the catharsis or hegemony of a fundamental social group on the intellectual and theoretical terrain over the whole of society. In this conception, as Frosini argues,

Philosophy is a particular form of ideology, the most coherent and unitary form, therefore capable of unifying the political forces and making them effective at the highest possible level. In the work of philosophy, ultimately assimilable with the process of constructing a hegemony, the opening of a space of truth and the concrete practical construction of a social order coincide.<sup>86</sup>

The practical realization and diffusion of a philosophy, or hegemonic conception of the world of a determinate social class throughout the entire social fabric fundamentally reshapes the ideological terrain, that is the effective relations of thought and knowledge prevalent in a historically determinate social formation, in this way radically shifting and transforming the actual social and political forces in struggle as their effective center of coordination, organization, and condensation. It follows that all philosophy, even in the form of abstract speculation, must be critically considered from the standpoint of its practical, political, and ideological effects within the prism of the struggle for hegemony. Viewed in these terms, i.e. through the notion of translatability between philosophy and politics, every philosophy is implicitly a modality of doing politics, and therefore must be analyzed in terms of its practical effects, or truth-power, following Gramsci's reinterpretation of the second thesis. Thus, in a note entitled "Introduction to the study of philosophy. Translatability of scientific languages", he writes:

The notes written under this rubric must be grouped in fact under the general rubric on the relations between speculative philosophies and the philosophy of praxis and their reduction to this latter as a political moment that the philosophy of praxis explains "politically". Reduction of all speculative philosophies to "politics", to a moment of historico-political life; the philosophy of praxis conceives the reality of human relations of knowledge as an element of political "hegemony".<sup>87</sup>

A month later, and with this perspective in mind, Gramsci reflects on an issue with which he had been preoccupied in Notebook 8, namely that of the relation between the philosophies or conceptions of the world of the intellectuals and those of the masses within the political prism of hegemony. Following

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<sup>86</sup> Frosini 2008, 730-1.

<sup>87</sup> Q 10, II, 6 (iv), 1245, written in May 1932.

on from his criticism of Croce's failure to grasp the nexus between philosophy and history in political and ideological terms, Gramsci writes, in a note entitled "Introduction to the study of philosophy", that

The history of philosophy as it is generally understood, that is as the history of philosophers' philosophies, is the history of attempts made and ideological initiatives undertaken by a specific class of people to change, correct or perfect the conceptions of the world that exist in any particular age and thus to change the norms of conduct that go with them; in other words, to change practical activity as a whole . . . The philosophy of an historical epoch is . . . nothing other than the mass of variations that the leading group has succeeded in imposing on preceding reality.<sup>88</sup>

### **3.6 The philosophy of praxis as an absolute immanence, an absolute worldliness and earthliness of thought**

Within this general conception of all philosophy as politics, i.e. as hegemonic interventions within a historically determinate cultural and ideological complex in order to reconstitute ways of seeing and thinking about the world in a way conducive to the solidification of a hegemonic ruling bloc, what is it that specifically distinguishes the philosophy of praxis?

In the significantly expanded second draft of Q 8, 198, in which the eleventh thesis on Feuerbach was identified as the theoretical basis in Marx for the re-elaboration of Marxism as a philosophy of praxis, following Labriola's earlier indications, Gramsci now explicitly links his understanding of the eleventh thesis with the second thesis. Confronting again Croce's allegedly erroneous conception of the eleventh thesis as a rejection of all philosophy in favor of revolutionary praxis, and again reaffirming the need 'to construct a philosophy of praxis posed by Antonio Labriola', Gramsci contends

is one not instead dealing with the demand, in the face of the "scholastic", purely theoretical or contemplative philosophy, of the revindication of a philosophy that produces a corresponding ethic, a realizing will and that, in the last analysis identifies itself with these? The XI thesis: 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world differently; it is now time to change it', (represents) the energetic affirmation of a unity between theory and practice', adding that this 'is only the assertion of the "historicity" of philosophy made in terms of an absolute immanence, of an

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<sup>88</sup> Q 10, II, 17, 1255.

“absolute worldliness” - (which) can still be justified by the famous proposition that “the German workers’ movement is the heir to classical German philosophy . . . the “heir” continues the predecessor, but does so “practically”, because it has deduced from mere contemplation an active will capable of transforming the world and in this practical activity there is also contained the “knowledge” that it is only rather in practical activity that there lies “real knowledge” and not “scholasticism”.<sup>89</sup>

The eleventh thesis, as the energetic affirmation of the unity of theory and practice, philosophy and politics, that is, a philosophy of praxis, must be grasped as an “absolute immanence”, i.e. an “absolute worldliness”. The new non-metaphysical concept of immanence is then directly related to Marx’s stress on the need for a thought that practically and politically demonstrates its reality and power, its this-worldliness [*Diesseitigkeit*]. “Absolute immanence” is used here as a synonym with “absolute worldliness” [*terrestrità assoluta*], directly recalling Gramsci’s translation of Marx’s *Diesseitigkeit* as *il carattere terreno* - i.e. the “worldly” or “earthly” character of truth linked to practical power.<sup>90</sup> As he reaffirmed in Notebook 11, the philosophy of praxis is ‘the absolute worldliness and earthliness’ of thought [*la mondanizzazione e terrestrità assoluta del pensiero*], and ‘It is along this line that one must trace the thread of the new conception of the world’.<sup>91</sup> “*Mondanizzazione*” thus also implicitly recalls Gramsci’s translation of the fourth thesis, the ‘inner strife and intrinsic contradictoriness’ characteristic of the “secular” or “earthly” basis of thought that Gramsci translated as the “worldly” or “earthly” basis (*la base mondana*).<sup>92</sup> In fact, in the C-text of the crucial Q 4, 45, in which Gramsci suggested a concrete mode of interpreting and understanding the antagonistic social world “from within” it, that is necessarily inside the field of social conflicts, and from the particular social, practical, i.e. political and ideological standpoint assumed within it (‘the consciousness wherein the philosopher himself, understood both as an individual and as a social group, not only understands contradictions but posits himself as an element of the contradiction and raises this element to a principle of politics and action’<sup>93</sup>), he now makes the stronger claim that philosophy ‘raises this element to a principle of knowledge and therefore of action’,<sup>94</sup> i.e. the identification of knowledge and action, philosophy and politics, truth and praxis (the philosophy of praxis). Finally, one can note that two notes later, in the C-text of Q 4, 37 in which Gramsci first suggested that Marxism should be reconstructed as a “philosophy of act (praxis) . . . in the profane sense’ (also as we will recall, the same note in which he had first presented the dilated, gnoseological

<sup>89</sup> Q 10, II, 31 (i), 1270-1, (June - August 1932).

<sup>90</sup> Q 2355.

<sup>91</sup> Q 11, 27, 1437, (July - August 1932).

<sup>92</sup> Q 2356.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Q 11, 62, 1487, (August - the end of 1932).

reformulation of ideology), Gramsci now also adds ‘in the “worldly” sense (‘philosophy of the act (praxis, development) . . . in the most profane and worldly [*mondano*] sense of the word’), thus linking this to Marx’s second and fourth theses, and to the status of the philosophy of praxis as an “absolute immanence”, absolute worldliness and earthliness of thought.<sup>95</sup>

In other words, what had been implicit since Notebook 4 and in the early appearances of the term “philosophy of praxis” has now become explicit; as a philosophy of praxis, Marx’s theory is not external or transcendent to the concrete reality it seeks to comprehend, nor is it immanent in reality in the speculative idealist sense. Rather it is immanent to the reality about which it philosophizes in the concrete, non-metaphysical sense that it self-consciously recognizes its own earthly or worldly basis (*la base mondana*) i.e. its concrete conditions of emergence within a historically determinate terrain of social, political, and ideological struggle. It therefore does not set itself above the terrain of class struggle and contradictions, but conceives itself as a theory necessarily traversed and overdetermined by the class contradictions by which historical reality is lacerated. It seeks to grasp the terrain of social, political, and ideological struggle from within it (immanently), hence a form of interpreting, understanding, and knowing practically and politically inside the very terrain of struggle it seeks to coherently elaborate and theorize. It thus constitutes a form of knowing and understanding from a necessarily *partial* standpoint within the terrain of struggle itself, as a philosophy or conception of the world which works to coincide and identify itself with the specific concrete needs, problems, and ways of life and seeing of the world of the working masses.

### 3.6.1 The philosophy of praxis as the immanent critique of common sense

This conception of the specificity of the philosophy of praxis as an “absolute immanence”, an “absolute worldliness and earthliness” of thought, or as he described in a slightly different register, an “absolute historicism”, the “greatest”, or most complete ‘maximum “historicism”’,<sup>96</sup> in other words, a philosophy that self-consciously and critically thinks its own historicity as a form of knowing practically and politically as the partial expression of a historically determinate class in a specific historical period, finds its concrete expression, as was already implicit in Notebook 8, in the distinctive relation the philosophy of praxis establishes with common sense. In the reorganization of notes in Notebook 11, as

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<sup>95</sup> Q 11, 64, 1492.

<sup>96</sup> Q 11, 27, 1437, Q 4, 24, 443, Q 16, 9, 1864.



Thomas rightly says, Gramsci ‘stabilizes in his conceptual vocabulary, the new relation prefigured at least since Notebook 8’ between the philosophy of praxis and common sense.<sup>97</sup> In this perspective, the central feature of the new philosophy of praxis consists in ‘the distinctive vertical and pedagogical relation which it, and it alone as a philosophy that thinks the centrality of *praxis*, is able to establish with *senso comune*’,<sup>98</sup> the fragmented, incoherent, and heterogeneous popular conceptions of the world of the multitude which he had theorized in Notebook 8.

On the basis of Labriola’s construal of historical materialism as a philosophy of praxis which is immanent to that about which it philosophizes, Gramsci in fact develops and elaborates an original and distinctive interpretation of Marx’s philosophy that moves far beyond anything indicated by Labriola. In this conception, the philosophy of praxis emerges as the immanent critique of common sense. In Thomas’ words,

Philosophy in this perspective is indeed distinct from *senso comune*, offering a knowledge “superior” to . . . the latter . . . However, philosophy only becomes such by acknowledging that it is dependent upon *senso comune* as the raw material of its own development. *Senso comune* is here grasped as immanent to philosophy - but philosophy, conceived as a conception of the world of the masses, is also inherent to *senso comune* as its immanent critique. In this “supra-logical” conception, the incoherence of *senso comune* is not the negation of the coherence of philosophy; rather, at least for the philosophy praxis, it is its precondition, the “ground” from which coherence emerges.<sup>99</sup>

This interpretation is corroborated not only in Q 11, 12, adduced by Thomas, in which Gramsci argued that the philosophy of praxis ‘must be a criticism of “common sense”, basing itself initially, however, on common sense in order to demonstrate that “everyone” is a philosopher and that it is not a question of introducing from scratch a scientific form of thought into everyone’s individual life, but of renovating and making “critical” an already existing activity’,<sup>100</sup> but also in the draft written three months earlier in Notebook 8 in which Gramsci had first put forth this argument,<sup>101</sup> and in which, as already suggested, this idea of the philosophy of praxis as an immanent critique of common sense was already implicit.

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<sup>97</sup> Thomas 2010, 372.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid. 373.

<sup>99</sup> Thomas 2010, 377.

<sup>100</sup> Q 11, 12, 1383.

<sup>101</sup> Q 8, 220, 1080.

### 3.6.2 The truth-power of the philosophy of praxis: coherence and the capacity to act

Nevertheless, it is in Notebook 11, as Thomas contends, that the concretization of the notion of “coherence”, and its relation to the incoherence of common sense, which started to assume definite shape in Notebook 8, issues in a distinctive concept, grasped not simply in the logical sense, but more precisely in the “supra-logical” sense of its efficacy, or capacity to act, and which moreover, is closely linked to the previously discussed historicism of the philosophy of praxis. “Coherence”, in this second sense, is employed ‘to consider the problem of the historicity and the historical efficacy of a given conception of the world’.<sup>102</sup> The truth, i.e. the effective historical power and transformative capacities of the philosophy of praxis depends on its ability to overcome what Thomas refers to as “the non-contemporaneity of the present”, that is, the fractured, discordant, and contradictory nature of the present, which is “non-identical with itself”,<sup>103</sup> a notion which becomes comprehensible against the backdrop of Gramsci’s re-reading of the sixth thesis on Feuerbach.

As we have seen, the understanding of the “nature” of human beings in terms of the historical ensemble of social relations, i.e. contradictory class antagonisms, enabled the understanding of thought itself as historically, socially, and politically constituted in a contradictory and antagonistic way on the basis of these contradictory social relations. This, in turn, shaped an understanding of philosophy itself as situated within these historically determinate class relations, as part of a contradictory and antagonistic theoretical field, the latter being the expression, in the realm of consciousness, of the conflicts in the former. In this way was opened up the understanding of the intellectual field as also necessarily a political one, i.e. the ideological terrain of superstructures. Gramsci continued to build on this idea in Notebook 8:

Since the ensemble of social relations is contradictory, human historical consciousness is contradictory, having said that, the question arises of how this contradictoriness manifests itself. It manifests itself all across the body of society through the existence of the different historical consciousnesses of various groups, and it manifests itself in individuals as a reflection of these group antinomies. Among subaltern groups, given the lack of historical initiative, the fragmentation is greater; they face a harder struggle to liberate themselves from imposed (rather than freely propounded) principles in order to arrive at an autonomous historical consciousness. How will this consciousness be formed? How does one go about choosing the elements that would constitute the autonomous consciousness? Does it mean that every “imposed” element will

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<sup>102</sup> Thomas 2010, 369.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid. 282-3.

have to be repudiated a priori? It will have to repudiated only insofar as it is imposed, but not in itself; in other words, it will be necessary to give it a new form that is affiliated with the given group.<sup>104</sup>

This perspective helps to account for the fractured, disjointed, and inconsistent character of the conceptions of the masses. Any “present”, or historically specific ensemble of social relations, is not simply contradictory in a synchronic sense, but also diachronically, as residues and elements from the past get deposited in the present, thus forming complex sedimentations in the present that are simultaneously relics of the past. This heterogeneous and contradictory conglomeration, or composite, of historical traces gets refracted throughout the whole social body, the whole ensemble of social relations, both across and within social groups and classes, and therefore, within individuals and individual consciousness:

When the conception of the world is not critical and coherent, but accidental and disjointed . . . one’s own personality is composed in a bizarre way: there are elements of the caveman and principles of the most modern and advanced science, prejudices of the past, local bigoted historical phases and intuitions of a future philosophy . . . To criticize one’s own conception of the world means, therefore, to make it unitary and coherent and raise it up to the point reached by the most advanced thought in the world . . . The beginning of critical elaboration is the consciousness of that which one really is, that is, a “know yourself” as a product of the historical process which has left behind an infinity of traces without an inventory. It is necessary to compile such an inventory from the outset.<sup>105</sup>

The greater coherence and thus, historical efficacy and practical power of the philosophy of praxis depends on the consciousness of this complex notion of historicity illustrated in the above passages. That is, the philosophy of praxis must compile an inventory of the infinity of historical traces deposited in the determinate ensemble of social relations in which it finds itself, as an integral element of the struggle to transform and elevate the contradictory and disjointed conceptions of the world of the masses into a coherent and therefore, more historically effective form with a greater capacity for

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<sup>104</sup> Q 8, 153, 1032-3. See also Q 8, 151, 1032, and the corresponding C-text of both - Q 16, 12, 1874-5.

<sup>105</sup> Q 11, 12, 1376. This type of framework helps illuminate the complexity of the terrain of consciousness, of the numerous distinctions Grasmci makes between different grades or levels of thought, such as common sense, folklore, science, religion, and philosophy, along with his struggle to come to grips with the nature of their complicated interrelations. Nevertheless, it is clear that philosophy, as a conception of the world corresponding to the hegemony of a fundamental social class, emerges as the most effective, coherent, and rationalized form of elaboration of the other intellectual orders.

transformative historical agency, in this way overcoming the passivity induced by the incoherence of common sense. As Gramsci argues,

one cannot be a philosopher, that is, have a critically coherent conception of the world, without being conscious of its historicity, of the phases of development represented by it and of the fact that it stands in contradiction to other conceptions or to elements of other conceptions. One's own conception of the world responds to determinate problems posed by reality that in their actuality are precisely determined and "original". How is it possible to think the present, and a precisely determined present with a mode of thought that was worked out for problems of the often very distant and superseded past? If this happens, it means that one is an "anachronism" in one's own time, a fossil, and not living in the modern world, or at least that one is bizarrely composite.<sup>106</sup>

In short, Gramsci's re-reading of the sixth thesis on Feuerbach is inextricably linked with that of the second and eleventh, the historicist conception with that of the unity of theory and practice as an absolute immanence or worldliness, in other words, the philosophy praxis as an immanent critique of common sense. The ability of the philosophy of praxis to critically transform common sense into a coherent conception of the world is contingent upon the former possessing this historical consciousness, since the contradictory farrago of countless historical residues gets deposited across and within social groups and classes, and therefore, within the individuals that compose them. It follows that a philosophy of praxis that seeks to critically transform the bizarrely composed common sense, must also confront and comprehend this infinity of contradictory historical traces that constitute the unique and "original" synchronic present, as a fundamental condition of its ability to confront effectively the problems, needs, and interests of the popular subaltern classes as they present themselves in their historical specificity.

It is within these terms that the elaboration of the philosophy of praxis in relation to common sense can be understood as the politics of hegemony:

The active man of the masses operates practically, but doesn't have a clear theoretical consciousness of his practical activity, which nonetheless is a knowing of the world in so far as it transforms it. His theoretical consciousness can indeed be historically in opposition to his activity. One might almost say that he has two theoretical consciousnesses (or a contradictory consciousness): one which is implicit in his activity and which in reality unites him with all his collaborators in the practical transformation of reality; and one, superficially explicit or verbal, which he has inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed. But this "verbal" conception is not without consequences: it holds together a specific social group, influences moral conduct and the

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<sup>106</sup> Q 11, 12, 1376-7.

direction of will . . . which can reach a point in which the contradictory state consciousness does not permit any action, any decision or any choice, and produces a condition of moral and political passivity. The critical understanding of self takes place therefore through a struggle of political “hegemonies”, of opposing directions, first in the ethical field, then in that of politics, in order to arrive at a superior elaboration of one’s own conception of the real. Consciousness of being part of a determinate hegemonic force (that is to say, political consciousness) is the first stage towards a further self-consciousness in which theory and practice are finally united. Thus the unity of theory and practice is not just a matter of mechanical fact, but a part of the historical process, whose elementary and primitive phase is to be found in the sense of “distinction”, of “separation”, in an instinctive feeling of independence, and which progresses to the level of real and complete possession of a unitary and coherent conception of the world. This is why it must be stressed that the political development of the concept of hegemony represents a great philosophical advance as well as a politico-practical one, because it necessarily supposes an intellectual unity and an ethic in conformity with a conception of the real that has gone beyond common sense and has become, if only within still narrow limits, critical.<sup>107</sup>

This new way of conceiving and practicing philosophy as a “philosophy of praxis” therefore, represents a fundamental displacement of the role and terrain of theory and philosophy, rearticulated in political terms as the most coherent, historically effective comprehension of the practical life, needs, and interests of the subaltern popular classes within a historically specific, contradictory ensemble of social relations. Only through this active pedagogical relationship with the masses can philosophy become genuinely philosophical, the theoretical articulation or conception of the world of a proletarian-based, mass hegemonic politics, as part of a historical struggle to unite theory and practice. In a last attempt at theorizing this relation, Gramsci wrote

If the problem of producing the identity of theory and practice is posed, it is posed in this sense: to construct, on the basis of a determinate practice, a theory that, coinciding and identifying itself with the decisive elements of the same practice, may accelerate the historical process taking place, rendering practice more homogeneous, coherent, efficient in all of its elements, strengthening it to the maximum; or, given a certain theoretical position, to organize the indispensable practical element for setting it to work. The identity of theory and praxis is a

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<sup>107</sup> Q 11, 12, 1385-6.

critical act, by means of which practice is demonstrated to be rational and necessary or theory to be realistic and rational.<sup>108</sup>

Here we have the ‘reciprocal “reduction” so to speak, a passage from one to the other and vice versa,<sup>109</sup> ‘the passage from *knowing* to *understanding* to *feeling* and vice versa from feeling to understanding to knowing’,<sup>110</sup> that Gramsci had argued in 1930 must exist between intellectuals and the masses, theory and practice, now posed as a struggle for the dialectical identity in distinction between the two, a mutual or reciprocal translatability between politics and philosophy, in short a philosophy of praxis that can maximize its coherence, truth-power, and transformative capacities as an “absolute immanence” or an “absolute worldliness”.

### 3.7 The nexus between philosophy and ideology: a clarification

Every philosophy is a form of politics, a practical hegemonic intervention into a historically determinate social, cultural, and ideological panorama, in which it is itself necessarily interspersed and overdetermined, and which it seeks to fundamentally transform. But only the philosophy of praxis consciously thinks this fact as essential to its own status as a distinctive mode of conceiving and practicing philosophy as an absolute immanence, or absolute historicism. Jan Rehmann fails to grasp this in his effort to stress the critical aspect of Gramsci’s concept of ideology, arguing that ‘when Gramsci criticized Croce’s distinction between philosophy and ideology, he was dealing primarily with Croce’s philosophy and in a wider sense with traditional philosophies in general, whose ideological functions were obvious’.<sup>111</sup> In other words he rejects ‘the assumption that the difference between the philosophy of praxis and ideology, as well as between philosophy and common sense, was only a quantitative one, a difference of degree and gradation, a continuum rather than a rupture’.<sup>112</sup>

Probably the clearest refutation of Rehmann’s construal consists in the fact that Gramsci’s notion that there can only be a quantitative distinction of degree between philosophy and ideology, although employed in the context of a polemic against Croce’s historicism, was taken directly from his earlier statements concerning the achievements of the Turin communists which we have seen. He unequivocally

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<sup>108</sup> Q 15, 22, 1780, written in May 1933.

<sup>109</sup> Q 3, 48, 330-1.

<sup>110</sup> Q 4, 33, 451.

<sup>111</sup> Rehmann 2013, 144.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid. 143.

believes that their great merit in those turbulent years was precisely that they *did not* place themselves and their critical theoretical and political activity in fundamental opposition to the conceptions of the masses, and he asserted in clear-cut terms that ‘Marxist theory cannot be in fundamental opposition to ‘the “spontaneous” sentiments of the masses’, but instead, ‘there is, between the two, a “quantitative” difference - of degree not of quality’.<sup>113</sup> This indicates that Gramsci’s argument about the quantitative, rather than qualitative, relation between philosophy and ideology was not confined to a critique of Croce and traditional philosophy, but instead is part of an attempt to redefine the whole of philosophy itself, including Marx’s own theory as a philosophy of praxis, as this chapter has contended. Not surprisingly, we find that in Gramsci’s attempts to redefine philosophy examined above, the relationship between philosophy, as the most coherent and effective hegemonic elaboration of the political consciousness of a fundamental social class, is never expounded as being in fundamental opposition or discontinuity with the ideological terrain. What we find in the Notebooks is precisely the opposite. That the quantitative philosophy-ideology distinction also applies to the philosophy of praxis is also substantiated by the fact that he articulated this interpretation in terms of the relation of political forces, which is not simply a set of analytical distinctions intended to understand the development of political consciousness of any social group, but the progressive revolutionary forces in particular, that is, how they can move beyond economic-corporate ideological consciousness towards hegemony and catharsis. As Gramsci had said, the establishment of the cathartic moment should be the starting point for the philosophy of praxis. Rehmann acknowledges that the philosophy of praxis must be a critique of corporatism, which impedes the achievement of working class hegemony and catharsis,<sup>114</sup> but for some reason he does not connect this with Gramsci’s inscription of this argument within the quantitative ideology-philosophy relation.

More broadly, Rehmann correctly recognizes that the philosophy of praxis ‘requires a critique of common sense that does not proceed from without, but rather needs to find its anchorage-point within’ common sense,<sup>115</sup> and also that ‘Every Marxist political project has to deal with the contradiction that 1) it must intervene into the ideological forms of existing class society and is thereby necessarily co-determined by them . . . and therefore 2) needs a strong ideology-critical philosophy of praxis that helps to think through what it is doing and to historicize its own ideological involvements’.<sup>116</sup> And yet, these insights are again, not linked to Gramsci’s arguments regarding the mere difference of degree between ideology and philosophy, or between it and common sense. This refusal to affirm that all thought is to some extent ideological, including Marxism or the philosophy of praxis, is motivated by Rehmann’s

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<sup>113</sup> Q 3, 48, 330-1.

<sup>114</sup> Rehmann 2013, 140-1.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid. 130.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid. 144-5.

concern that ‘The prioritization of a “neutral” concept of ideology is one-sided in that it tends to suppress Gramsci’s critical usage of the concept in connection with his definition of a philosophy of praxis, his critique of common sense, “passive revolution”, and corporatism’, thus leading to the obliteration of the specificity of Gramsci’s concept of ideology and its assimilation with the neutralization of the concept carried out by the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Internationals.<sup>117</sup> While Rehmann can be credited with highlighting the critical aspect of Gramsci’s usage of the concept, his motivation to overcome the proliferation of its “neutral” interpretation led to his failure to recognize that the philosophy of praxis cannot, for Gramsci, be qualitatively differentiated from ideology.

It seems to me that a productive approach to understanding Gramsci’s concept of ideology must move away from the debate concerning whether it is neutral, positive, negative, or critical,<sup>118</sup> towards Rehmann’s own suggestion that the former’s diffuse, heterogeneous, and inconsistent usage of the concept ‘is an indication that Gramsci was not mainly concerned with developing a systematic ideology-theory’,<sup>119</sup> but with the qualification that the concept of ideology represented not so much, as Rehmann claimed, the transition to the elaboration of the theory of hegemony,<sup>120</sup> but more precisely that of philosophy itself as the theoretical form or expression of class hegemony. If the above analysis centers on the dilated, gnoseological reformulation of ideology, this is because it is in fact, representative of Gramsci’s only real attempt to theorize the concept, and furthermore, because it was crucially based on a re-reading of Marx that was absolutely pivotal for Gramsci’s subsequent attempt both to redefine philosophy as a whole, and delineate the specificity of Marxism as a philosophy of praxis.

On a basic level, this redefinition of ideology indicated a general approach or fundamental point of orientation to conceive the whole terrain of human thought, consciousness, and relations of knowledge as belonging to the space of the political, i.e. the ideological terrain of superstructures. Thus, when Gramsci reaffirms in Notebook 10 that the term “ideology”, ‘in the sense used in the philosophy of praxis’, designates ‘the whole ensemble of the superstructures’,<sup>121</sup> and that ‘the philosophy of praxis is itself a superstructure, the terrain on which specific social groups become conscious of their own social being, their own strength, their own tasks, their own becoming’,<sup>122</sup> these claims, I think, should be

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid 144.

<sup>118</sup> “Neutral” in the sense of being class-specific conceptions of the world, or media for the articulation of social group and class interests, without reference to their truth-status. I use “negative” in the epistemological sense of being illusory, distorted, or “false”, and “positive” in the sense of having a positive epistemological value, i.e. not “false” but means of enabling knowledge.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid. 134.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Q 10, II, 41i, 1299.

<sup>122</sup> Q 10, II, 41xii, 1319.



understood in this general sense, i.e. that the entire terrain of human consciousness is partial, practical, and political, and in this general sense, ideological, being historically situated within determinate conflictual ensembles of social and class relations and serving as their modes of articulation. There is no outside to politics, i.e. ideology, in a society traversed by contradictions, conflicts, and scissions. Or put differently, so long as society is founded on antagonisms, human reality is a political arena of struggle, and therefore all human thought is situated inside a terrain of hegemonic struggle between conflicting relations of forces. Hence, Gramsci's careful mapping of the superstructural terrain, and the numerous distinctions he makes between different modes consciousness - common sense, folklore, science, religion, etc. All these forms of consciousness, and indeed, everything that forms the cultural world in the widest sense (including language), belong to a political, hence, ideological field of struggle.

On a deeper level however, the gnoseological redefinition of ideology on the basis of Marx's second thesis, as we have seen, constituted the basis for the critical differentiation between various modes of consciousness according to the varying *degrees* of truth, i.e. practical power from the political standpoint of hegemony, within the broader dilated conception of all thought as ideological. This was the basis for Gramsci's entire conception of philosophy in general, critically distinguished *quantitatively* from the ideological world as the form of consciousness with the maximum capacity of organization and condensation of the actual historical, social, and political forces in struggle, in short, with the highest degree of practical power and expansivity as the theoretical form or expression of the hegemony of a fundamental social class. Gramsci's specific conception of the philosophy of praxis was situated within and presupposed this broader conception of philosophy developed from the re-reading of the second thesis. Rehmann has utterly failed to grasp both the significance of the dilated, gnoseological conception of ideology for Gramsci's deeper project of redefining the entire nature of philosophy itself, as well as the distinctive specificity of the philosophy of praxis within the broader redefinition of philosophy. But it was precisely these elements that enabled Gramsci to successfully develop a conception capable of addressing the contradiction or tension perspicaciously identified by Rehmann, namely, that any Marxist project must be able to critically and effectively intervene, shift, and transform the existing ideological forms in class society, and is therefore, necessarily co-determined by, or participates, with these ideological forms, while on the other hand, it must develop a strong ideological-critical dimension that enables it to critically transform and supersede them.

### **3.8 The re-reading of Marx in Gramsci's philosophical reflections**

The centrality of Marx as arguably the principal point of reference both for Gramsci's sustained attempt to radically redefine the entire nature of philosophy, and to delineate the specificity of Marxism as a distinctive philosophy, is now evident. As we can see, this peculiar re-reading of Marx was a rather selective one, confined to a handful of texts orbiting around the *Theses*. The latter initially served as the basis on which to reject the classic philosophical dualism between metaphysical materialism and idealism, understood as transcendent ontological hypostatizations of a fundamental substance constitutive of all reality, whether a hypothetical substratum of "matter", an ideal "spirit", or some other mental substance, in favor of an understanding of reality, as well as all thought, as a human historical, social, and practical relation on the basis of a non-idealist concept of praxis as human labor and material production. This however, was only a prelude to the establishment of politics as an ontological and gnoseological principle. The sixth and fourth theses on Feuerbach, together with the implicit usage of *The Communist Manifesto* and *The Poverty of Philosophy*, converged to form a general picture of reality as a political terrain of struggle, scission, and conflict revolving around the fundamental class contradictions rooted in the economic structure. On this basis, human reality, as a dialectic of class contradictions, was grasped as necessarily historical. This provided the tacit framework underlying Gramsci's transformation of relations of thought, truth, and knowledge into political categories. The reinterpretation of Marx's 1859 Preface on the basis of the second thesis on Feuerbach, yielded the basic schema within which Gramsci redefined the whole of philosophy, including Marxism as a philosophy of praxis. All thought, including philosophy, was approached from the standpoint of its varying degrees of truth, or practical political power. Against this backdrop, Gramsci used the notion of translatability to grasp the specific practical, political effects of philosophy. *The Holy Family*, the "Introduction" to *The Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, and the eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, were read in conjunction with one another, and from which Gramsci registered the hegemonic power of philosophy, and consequently, the need for Marxism, not to abandon philosophy, but rather to fundamentally reconstitute it as part of a proletarian-based hegemonic project. Marx's eleventh thesis was identified as the theoretical core for the re-elaboration of Marxism as a distinctive philosophy of praxis, but whose underlying substrate resided in the pivotal second thesis, as the basis for the status of the philosophy of praxis as an absolute immanence, or absolute worldliness and earthliness of thought, i.e. its distinctive character as a self-conscious mode of knowing practically and politically from a specific partial class standpoint within the struggle, a conception in which Marx's fourth thesis on Feuerbach was also crucial.

It is thus, that Gramsci was able to utilize a relatively limited number of Marx's texts, which, with the exception of the 1859 Preface, are chronologically confined to the 1840's, in the service of a fundamental redefinition of philosophy, and of the distinctive philosophical status of Marxism. The next

two chapters will be concerned to examine Marx from the standpoint of Marx, rather than Gramsci's Marx.

## **Chapter Four**

### **From philosophy as a transformative force to the discovery of the workers**

#### **4.1 From Gramsci to Marx**

The previous three chapters sought to examine Gramsci's reconstruction of Marx's thought as a philosophy of praxis on the basis of a re-reading orbiting principally around the *Theses*. The conception that emerged contained within itself both a distinctive understanding of the nature of Marxist philosophy, as well as a broader, critical re-conceptualization of the nature of philosophy itself. On the basis of the short text, around which a number of other texts were interpreted, Gramsci had attributed to Marx the idea of a radical, positive reconstitution of philosophy as a practical, political force in the service of the masses. In this conception, philosophy had to be rethought departing from the political struggle, as the coherent expression and articulation of the practices, needs, and interests of the masses that constitute its organic basis. In this way, philosophy could become a mass-based, revolutionary political force. On the other hand, Gramsci ascribed to Marx a critical conception of philosophy in general in terms of its practical, political effects within the framework of social and class struggle.

The aim of the following two chapters consists in examining Marx's own shifting approach to philosophy, as he understood it in his own historical and intellectual context, and in connection to the specific problems with which he was concerned to confront. Within this broader trajectory through philosophy, the *Theses* indeed represent a watershed moment in Marx's intellectual development, one which is extremely important in radically reshaping Marx's relation to philosophy. In order to grasp the nature and significance of this rupture, it is necessary to understand both what led up to it and the complex fallout that occurred in its wake.

This chapter seeks to trace the young Marx's tortuous intellectual journey through philosophy up to and including *The Holy Family*, his last key text before the theoretical rupture that transpires with the composition of the *Theses*. I argue that Marx's attempt to critically re-appropriate and transform philosophy into a mass politics in the service of a project of social and political transformation, and human liberation, represents only a transient phase in his thinking which he abandoned for primarily political reasons. Marx definitively transcended the problematic of figuring out how philosophy and philosophical critique could be politically mobilized as an integral element of the human struggle for

liberation once he realized, as a consequence of his contacts with the labor movements in Paris, that the workers could actively develop and appropriate theoretical consciousness for themselves within the framework of politics and the class struggle, and consequently, could be the active agents of their own emancipation. However, rather than totally abandoning philosophy, Marx initially attempts to integrate his conception of a proletarian-based revolutionary communism within the broader framework of a Feuerbachian-inspired materialist philosophical humanism. This same philosophical framework provided the basis for Marx's critique, for which he was again heavily indebted to Feuerbach, of speculative philosophical idealism as a mystifying, alienated inversion of the real relations between thought and reality.

#### **4.2 The young Marx's intellectual context**

Marx's early intellectual development, as is well known, occurred in the context of the break-up of Hegelianism into more or less distinct "schools", whose philosophical differences were simultaneously political. The central philosophical thematic around which the various political positions coagulated consisted in the relationship between reason and reality, that is, the structures of reason and philosophical concepts with the phenomenal world of appearances in which the former articulated itself. The various responses to this question had major political, social, and cultural implications in the Prussia of the 1830's and 40's. As John Toews puts it,

In what sense should the existing cultural order, its political institutions and communal ethos, its artistic creations, and its religious language, rituals, and doctrines be regarded as the perfected embodiment of reason in the world, as the historical actuality of absolute spirit? Did Hegel's claim to have achieved systematic knowledge of the totality imply that the embodiment of reason in reality had been completed?<sup>1</sup>

A conservative right-wing Hegelian tendency responded in the affirmative, believing that existing social, religious, and political institutions of Prussia represented the full actualization of reason and the Absolute spirit in the world. However, as this reactionary group consolidated its power within the Prussian administration, becoming increasingly resistant to growing demands for progressive reform, a Hegelian "Center" began to crystallize that challenged the rigidity of the right-wing strand. Denying that the

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<sup>1</sup> Toews 1993, 387.

principles of reason were fully realized in the institutions of contemporary Prussia, the function of rational philosophical comprehension could no longer consist simply in the retrospective transposition of existing phenomenal reality into the terms of conceptual reason. Instead, with the recognition of a cleavage between the reality of appearances and the principles of reason, philosophical understanding now provided the basis for programs of moderate political reform intended to synchronize phenomenal reality with the essential reality of reason. Corresponding to the growing consciousness of the gap between reason and existing Prussian reality over the course of the 1830's, philosophical critique became increasingly associated with projects of radical political change.<sup>2</sup> 'From this perspective', writes Toews,

Hegel's conceptual structures were transformed from a history comprehended into a program for future action; the actuality of the absolute in self-conscious freedom became not a presupposition of knowledge but the object of constructive historical practice . . . It was in practice . . . that the long-sought reconciliation of the human and the divine could actually be achieved.<sup>3</sup>

It was within this context of heated philosophical debate and political conflict that a secular humanist "Left" Hegelian tendency began to emerge in the late 1830's, and in which Marx's initial intellectual formation took shape. Unlike the Hegelian schools just discussed, this tendency broke with the religious metaphysical discourse characteristic of the former; the properties previously ascribed to the divine absolute were displaced onto human beings themselves. The central problematic thus shifted from the realization of the divine in the human to the historical realization of the now essentially human qualities and properties of man, i.e. the actualization of the true human essence. Exactly what constituted the latter was a point of contention. Nevertheless, this tendency shared a common framework in which history was understood as a secular, immanent process through which human beings progressively realized and fulfilled their essential nature, rather than the actuation of the divine in human relations. This changed perspective was accompanied by an alternative understanding of the nature and function of philosophy, which was no longer viewed as a primarily metaphysical or quasi-theological enterprise, but instead as the rational and critical form of comprehending humanity's essential nature and the conditions of its historical actualization.<sup>4</sup>

This undermining of religious authority had dangerous political implications for the Prussian monarchy, for which Christianity served as a bulwark. The existing religious and political institutions of Prussia were revealed, in the eyes of the young Hegelians, to be in conflict with their various conceptions

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 388-90.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 390.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 391-3.

of the human essence and the conditions under which it could be realized.<sup>5</sup> It is important to emphasize this point for the present purposes of reconstructing and understanding the young Marx's philosophical trajectory. The philosophical environment in which Marx's thought developed was inseparable from the political struggles and conflicts of the day, and especially for the Left Hegelians, philosophy was both understood and intended to have practical and transformative effects on Prussian society. Their philosophical activity was oriented towards change. Hence, neither Marx nor the other radical young Hegelians were concerned with philosophy in the traditional sense as a purely academic or scholarly enterprise.<sup>6</sup>

This is especially true of Bruno Bauer, Marx's close friend and mentor during the latter's early days as a student in Berlin. Continuing the humanist reformulation of Hegelianism, which had already commenced with David Strauss' *Life of Jesus*, Bauer reinterpreted Hegel as a secular humanist. Those who understood Hegel's philosophy as a religious pantheism had erred, since the historical development and realization of Spirit was not that of God, but rather human self-consciousness.<sup>7</sup> History was a secular process of development of the creativity of human self-consciousness, while theology and religious metaphysics were denounced as false, although necessary, illusions projected by self-consciousness in its historical development. Only by passing through historical phases of self-objectification and alienation would self-consciousness achieve the recognition that the false appearances, deceptions, and illusions were its own self-positing creations, thereby resuming them back into itself as part of the evolution of the growing freedom of itself and its creative activity.<sup>8</sup>

In this perspective, the function of philosophical criticism consisted in the dissolution of existing illusions and false appearances, demonstrating their character as constraints and fetters to the free development of self-consciousness, and thus, antithetical to the true realization of the latter: 'philosophy becomes the critic of the established order . . . That which is and that which should be are now distinguished', and 'so philosophy must be active in politics, and whenever the established order contradicts the Self-consciousness of philosophy, it must be directly attacked and shaken'.<sup>9</sup> Philosophical critique measures the distance between existing reality and the principles of true rational self-consciousness, the incompatibility of the existing religious and political structures of Prussia with the freedom and liberty of human self-consciousness. Philosophy finds 'its highest goal in the overthrow of

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<sup>5</sup> Brudney 1998, 3-4.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 6.

<sup>7</sup> Mah 1987, 73.

<sup>8</sup> Bauer 1989, 177-202, Toews 1993, 394, Brudney 1998, 110-11.

<sup>9</sup> Bauer 1989, 128.

the established order',<sup>10</sup> and 'once having destroyed religion, and delivered a death blow to the church, will then most certainly want to overthrow the throne'.<sup>11</sup> Hence, for Bauer, philosophers 'are the most consistent and unrestrained revolutionaries'.<sup>12</sup>

### 4.3 The realization of philosophy in the world

The young Marx's famous 1837 letter to his father testifies to his similar concern with the cleavage between reason and reality, rational and real, that is the 'opposition between what is and what ought to be', which he considers to be 'a serious defect', and his consequent desire to transcend the fissure by seeking 'the idea in reality itself', writing that 'If previously the gods had dwelt above the earth, now they became its center'.<sup>13</sup> Marx's initial response to this problematic was heavily indebted to Bauer, with whom he had established an intimate friendship while a student in Berlin, the two frequenting the left-Hegelian Doctor's Club.<sup>14</sup>

#### 4.3.1 The practice of philosophy as theoretical critique

Bauer's influence is apparent in Marx's earliest philosophical texts, particularly in the preparatory material for his doctoral dissertation written from 1840-41. In the sixth notebook, the latter wrote that

there are moments when philosophy turns its eyes to the external world, and no longer apprehends it, but, as a practical person, weaves, as it were, intrigues with the world, emerges from the transparent kingdom of Amenthes and throws itself on the breast of the worldly Siren . . . as Prometheus, having stolen fire from heaven, begins to build houses and to settle upon the earth, so philosophy, expanded to be the whole world, turns against the world of appearance.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 60.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 126.

<sup>13</sup> CW: 1: 12, 18.

<sup>14</sup> Mah 1987, 53, Rubel and Manale 1975, 16, Rosen 1977, 127-8.

<sup>15</sup> CW: 1: 491.



Philosophy forms an abstract totality, detaching itself from the world out of which it emerged: 'philosophy has sealed itself off to form a consummate, total world', whose formation is a result of the general development of philosophy. But this development conditions 'the form in which philosophy turns into a practical relationship towards reality'. The world of appearance with which philosophy is confronted is 'a world torn apart'.<sup>16</sup> This is reminiscent of Bauer's notion of philosophical critique as that which measures the distance between the world and reason, the existing world of appearances and philosophy. Indeed, while Marx says that 'the theoretical mind, once liberated in itself, turns into practical energy, and, leaving the shadowy empire of Amenthes as *will*, turns itself against the reality of the world existing without it',<sup>17</sup> this practice of philosophy is, following Bauer, conceived as theoretical critique: 'the practice of philosophy is itself theoretical. It is the critique that measures the individual existence by the essence, the particular reality by the Idea'.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, Marx proceeds to argue that

When philosophy turns itself as will against the world of appearance, then the system is lowered to an abstract totality, that is, it has become one aspect of the world which opposes another one. Its relationship to the world is that of reflection. Inspired by the urge to realize itself, it enters into tension against the other. The inner self-contentment and completeness has been broken. What was inner light has become consuming flame turning outwards. The result is that as the world becomes philosophical, philosophy also becomes worldly, that its realization is also its loss.<sup>19</sup>

The intellectual transformation of self-consciousness serves as a prelude to the rational transformation of the world through the practical realization of the former in the latter. After philosophical consciousness sets itself in opposition to the world of appearances, thus revealing the chasm between what is and what ought to be, existence and essence, the non-philosophical and the philosophical, the opposition must be eliminated through the practical realization of philosophy in the world. In short, Marx, like Bauer, sees philosophical critique and criticism as the basis for practically changing the world and making it rational. It is true, however, that neither had a realistic or concrete conception of exactly how this was supposed to take place. How can philosophical critique and intellectual criticism be translated into real practice, into the actual transformation of the world? As Marx struggles to sketch an answer to this question in the ensuing years, he will break with Bauer's emphasis on philosophical critique and criticism.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 85.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

#### 4.3.2 The philosophical press and the universality of the state

Upon completing his doctorate, Marx hoped to pursue an academic career. However, such hopes were rapidly thwarted by the increasingly reactionary Prussian regime, whose opposition to left-Hegelian radicalism manifested itself through the suppression of their journals and their removal from the universities, a process that reached its apex with the termination of Bauer's teaching post at Bonn in the spring of 1842. Marx's aspiration for an academic career was dissolved, compelling him to pursue journalism as an alternative.

Marx's attitude towards philosophy in the articles written for the *Rheinische Zeitung*, for which he worked from the spring of 1842 to that of 1843, closely resembles that displayed in his doctoral material. In particular, he persists in his concern to unite philosophy with the world, rational philosophical consciousness with its basis in existing reality. Philosophical knowledge must be translated back into the reality from which it emerged:

Since every true philosophy is the intellectual quintessence of its time, the time must come when philosophy not only internally by its content, but also externally through its form, comes into contact and interaction with the real world of its day. Philosophy then ceases to be a particular system in relation to other particular systems, it becomes philosophy in general in relation to the world, it becomes the philosophy of the contemporary world.<sup>20</sup>

The result is 'that philosophy has become worldly and the world has become philosophical',<sup>21</sup> or as he put it in the previous paragraph, while philosophy has its initial existence in the world in the brain of the philosopher 'before it stand with its feet on the ground', this is but a prelude to the realization of the "head" as belonging to this world, 'or that this world is the world of the head'.<sup>22</sup> The fissure between the world and rational philosophical consciousness will thus be overcome, the former recognizing its harmony with the latter, i.e. the unity of form and content.

Marx believed that the entry of philosophy into the press and editorial offices would serve as the vehicle for the fulfillment of the unity of rational philosophical spirit with the world.<sup>23</sup> Through the philosophical press, material and private interests would dissolve into the higher universality of the state, the latter embodying rational philosophical principles and their realization in the world and the existing

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 198. Mah 1987, 183.

political order.<sup>24</sup> This conception of the nature and role of philosophy reflects the concrete experiences of Marx and the young Hegelians, their eviction from academia and subsequent retreat to the world of journalism. It also reflects Marx's overriding concern during his time working for the *Rheinische Zeitung*, namely, that material and private interests were undermining the universality of the state spirit.<sup>25</sup> Hence, the principal danger lies in the state lowering itself to the 'narrow limits of private property', acting in accordance with the needs of the latter.<sup>26</sup> The remedy lies in philosophy and its embodiment in the free press, serving as the instrument through which the material struggles of private interest will give way to the higher ideal spiritual principles of reason and the state.<sup>27</sup>

#### 4.3.3 The break with Hegel

Such views however, would prove to be short-lived. Marx's struggles against strict censorship of the newspaper culminated in early 1843 with a state edict demanding the cessation of any further publication. The Prussian state's suppression of the *Rheinische Zeitung* fuelled Marx's break with the Hegelian conception of the state, a rupture whose deeper roots lay, as Löwy correctly writes, in Marx's 'concrete experience of the true nature of the state and also of the power of private interests, and of the difficulty of harmonizing these with the general interest'.<sup>28</sup> In the spring and summer of 1843 Marx conducted a detailed interrogation of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, the incomplete manuscripts of which were only published in 1927.

Here, Marx's critique of Hegel's philosophy of the state and its relationship with civil society is inextricably linked with the latter's more fundamental philosophical system, the former epitomizing the erroneous character of Hegel's speculative idealist metaphysics. Hegel's chief error consisted in his speculative inversion of the real relations between reality and thought, subject and predicate. In Hegel's thought,

The idea is made the subject and the *actual* relation of family and civil society to the state is conceived as its *internal imaginary* activity. Family and civil society are the premises of the state; they are the genuinely active elements, but in speculative philosophy things are inverted. When

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<sup>24</sup> CW: 1: 164-5.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 235, 240.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 241.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 292, 164-5.

<sup>28</sup> Löwy 2005, 36.

the idea is made the subject, however, the real subjects, namely, civil society, family . . . become *unreal* objective elements of the idea with a changed significance.<sup>29</sup>

Empirical reality and the actual social life of human beings in family and civil society, are transmuted into a mere appearance or manifestation of the idea and its embodiment in the state. Rather than viewing family and civil society as the real empirical basis of the state, ‘according to Hegel, they are on the contrary *produced* by the actual idea’, reduced to mere finite embodiments of the development of the idea.<sup>30</sup> With ‘this inversion of subject and predicate’, in which ‘the idea is made the subject’ and actual reality is ‘conceived as the idea’s development and product’, the real empirical world is not only left uncomprehended and unexplained, but is even ‘accepted as it is’, and ‘expressed as rational’, consisting of the finite forms in which infinite mind articulates itself.<sup>31</sup> For Hegel, therefore, ‘the sole interest is in rediscovering “the idea” pure and simple, the “logical idea”, in every element, whether of the state or of nature’, and so ‘not the philosophy of law but logic is the real center of interest’.<sup>32</sup> As a direct result of Hegel’s speculative translation of reality into the phenomenal, finite form of appearance of the idea, the tensions and contradictions of the real world between private self-interest and universal interest, and in particular, its historical form as the antinomy between civil society and the political state, were grasped only as an apparent tensions reconciled through the essential unity of the absolute and its realization in the rational state. As Marx wrote, ‘Hegel’s chief error is to conceive the *contradiction of appearances as unity in essence, in the idea*, while in fact it has something more profound for its essence, namely, an *essential contradiction*’.<sup>33</sup>

The state is no longer regarded as the sphere of reason and universality, as the objective counterpart to the philosophical press capable of overcoming material and private interest. On the contrary, the modern state is now considered to be an alienated abstraction from real, “earthly” life in civil society, the heavenly and ethereal appearance of universality in detachment from the egoism of civil society. The state is therefore nothing but the affirmation of human estrangement; man’s life in civil society, the sphere of egoism and private property, leads him to objectify and exteriorize his social essence in an abstract, illusory universality in the political state. In short, the private atomistic egoism of civil society, the modern historical result of the development of free trade and private property,

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<sup>29</sup> CW: 3: 8.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 9.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 12, 9.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 12, 17.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 91.

constitutes the basis for the objectification of universality in a heavenly and other-worldly political sphere.<sup>34</sup>

Here, Ludwig Feuerbach's influence on Marx, who had progressively distanced himself from Bauer in 1842 while working for the editorial board of the *Rheinische Zeitung*,<sup>35</sup> is noticeable. The discourse of subject and predicate and their inversion is present not only in *The Essence of Christianity*, but especially in his *Preliminary Theses on the Reform of Philosophy*, in which such language is omnipresent, as part of a critical method for dealing with Hegel's speculative thought:

The method of the reformatory critique of *speculative philosophy* as such does not differ from that already used in the *Philosophy of Religion*. We need only turn the *predicate* into the *subject* and thus as *subject* into *object* and *principle* - that is, only *reverse* speculative philosophy. In this way, we have the unconcealed, pure, and untarnished truth.<sup>36</sup>

Just as in theology, human beings transpose their own qualities and attributes onto a transcendent fictional God, so in speculative philosophy, the culmination of which is Hegel's philosophical system, the properties of real, finite human beings are transposed onto the infinite absolute spirit, i.e. the idea: 'Speculative philosophy has made itself guilty of the *same error* as theology; it has made the determinations of reality or finiteness into the determinations and predicates of the infinite through the *negation of determinateness*'.<sup>37</sup> This is especially true of Hegel, who 'turns *things* into *mere thoughts*', in other words, '*Thought is being* in Hegel; i.e., *thought* is the *subject*, *being* the *predicate*'.<sup>38</sup> Hegelian speculative philosophy, like religion, inverts the real relations between reality and thought, subject and predicate. Hence, it is necessary to reverse or negate the negation, or invert again the inversion, restoring finite human beings in the real material world of nature as the basis of thought: 'The true relationship of thought to being is this only: *Being* is the *subject*, *thought* the *predicate*. Thought comes from being, but being does not come from thought'.<sup>39</sup>

Hence, when Marx breaks with Hegel's philosophy of the state, and comes to the conclusion that the latter's inversion of the civil society - state relation was a function of the more fundamental inversion at work in his speculative philosophical system between reality and thought, Marx finds the resources for such a critique in Feuerbach, the former applying the latter's transformative method of reversing the

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 28, 31-2.

<sup>35</sup> Rosen 1977, 131-2.

<sup>36</sup> Feuerbach 1972, 154.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 160.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 167.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 168, 157, 159-60.

subject-predicate relation at the levels both of reality and thought, and civil society and the state. Just as “man” alienates himself by positing his own idealized essence in God in theology and in an infinite spirit or idea in speculative philosophy, particularly Hegel’s, causing him to live a “split” life, so his life in civil society, the sphere of egoism and private property, leads him to objectify and exteriorize his social essence in an abstract, illusory universality in the political state.

#### 4.3.4 The entry of philosophy into political struggle

This shift in Marx’s thinking induced by his rupture with Hegel implied an alternative understanding of the tasks of philosophy, which could no longer turn to the “universality” of the state as the organism through which its own rational spirit could realize itself in the world. His analysis of the state-civil society nexus suggested that the achievement of the unity of philosophy with the world necessitated a transformation of civil society as the locus and source of human alienation in the abstract heaven of state universality. The North American republic and the Prussian monarchy were different state forms, but their basis and inner content was the same, namely, private property.<sup>40</sup> Hence, it was necessary to transform society, the locus of private property and inequality, and not merely external political forms.<sup>41</sup>

Marx’s letters to Ruge present some interesting indications concerning his views regarding the nature and tasks of philosophy:

it is precisely the advantage of the new trend that we do not dogmatically anticipate the world, but only want to find the new world through criticism of the old one. Hitherto philosophers have had the solution of all riddles lying in their writing desks, and the stupid, exoteric world had only to open its mouth for the roast pigeons of absolute knowledge to fly into it. Now philosophy has become mundane, and the most striking proof of this is that philosophical consciousness itself has been drawn into the torment of the struggle.<sup>42</sup>

Marx understands the status of philosophy as mundane and worldly; it does not place itself above the world, dogmatically asserting truths from a transcendent standpoint, but places itself within the existing world and the real human struggles to which it gives rise: ‘Hence, nothing prevents us from making

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<sup>40</sup> CW: 3: 31.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. 79.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. 142.

criticism of politics, participation in politics, and therefore *real* struggles, the starting point of our criticism, and from identifying our criticism with them'.<sup>43</sup> The point of departure for critical philosophy lies in the concrete struggles of the actual world, clarifying the meaning of these struggles. Philosophy must seek rational critical consciousness in the world, the reason immanent in the actual struggles and historical movement of the real world, the ideal within the real. Moreover, such a task cannot be fulfilled solely through the work of critical philosophers and intellectuals, but rather, can only be 'the work of united forces', i.e. thinking human beings and suffering humanity.<sup>44</sup> Such was Marx's conception of the tasks of the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*, the journal he planned to launch in Paris with Ruge. As Löwy says, this letter to Ruge 'shows us a Marx who is ideologically confused, who, after his break with the Prussian state and the liberal bourgeoisie has not yet "found" the proletariat and communism (except in the vague, ambiguous forms of "suffering humanity" and "true democracy")'.<sup>45</sup>

#### 4.3.5 The alliance of philosophy with the proletariat

Marx's "discovery" of the proletariat would only occur after his arrival in Paris in October 1843, which was at that time the epicenter of a widespread diffusion of communist and socialist theories, secret societies and organizations.<sup>46</sup> In one of his articles for the *Jahrbücher*, the "Introduction", written shortly after his arrival, the impact of this radical Paris milieu is discernible. To a certain extent, this text continues the themes found in his 1843 correspondence with Ruge. Philosophy and philosophical criticism must form part of the concrete actions and political struggles of the real world. The disclosure of religious forms of alienation is but a prelude to the critical analysis of the real world, the latter serving as the basis on which philosophy must practically realize itself in the world by transforming the latter.

In the opening paragraphs of the "Introduction", Marx wrote that the 'For Germany the *criticism of religion* is in the main complete, and criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism'. In other words, the heavenly, sacred, and otherworldly forms of human self-alienation in religion had already been exposed. Man 'looked for a superhuman being in the fantastic reality of heaven and found nothing there but the *reflection . . . the semblance of himself*'.<sup>47</sup> The critique of religious alienation thus paved the way

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 144.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. 145, Löwy 2005, 49.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. 45-6.

<sup>46</sup> See Löwy 2005, 64-76, for an account of the spread of communism in Paris in the 1840's.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 175.

for a critical project that found a real object and basis in the “secular” and “earthly” world of actual man. It is “man”, i.e. actual human beings along with the real social and political conditions in which they live that must become the foundation of true criticism: ‘The basis of irreligious criticism is: *Man makes religion*, religion does not make man . . . But man is no abstract being encamped outside the world. Man is *the world of man*, the state, society. This state, this society, produce religion, an *inverted world-consciousness*, because they are an *inverted world*’.<sup>48</sup> It follows that

The *task of history*, therefore, once the *world beyond the truth* has disappeared, is to establish the *truth of this world*. The immediate *task of philosophy*, which is at the service of history, once the *holy form* of human self-estrangement has been unmasked, is to unmask self-estrangement in its *unholy forms*. Thus the criticism of heaven turns into the criticism of earth, the *criticism of religion* into the *criticism of law* and the *criticism of theology* into the *criticism of politics*.<sup>49</sup>

What Feuerbach had accomplished in relation to theology and speculative philosophical idealism, Marx now intends to replicate and extend to new domains, taking over the former’s critical method of inversion and applying it to new objects of analysis, thereby uncovering the real forms of human alienation in the actual social and political world. As Zawar Hanfi argues, Marx’s ‘fascination with the method of Feuerbach’s criticism of religion and speculative philosophy can be adequately grasped only if it is realized that Marx believed to have discovered in it an effective instrument for a criticism of the profane world as a prerequisite for the realization of philosophy’.<sup>50</sup>

Indeed, the theme of the “Introduction” is consistent with that emphasized by Marx in his correspondence with Ruge, namely, that of the necessity for philosophy to become a practical, political, and transformative force through its own realization. Theoretical and philosophical criticism cannot be conceived as an end in itself,<sup>51</sup> but must become a practical material force in order to realize itself in the world. But this realization of philosophy is simultaneously its negation and supersession: ‘*you cannot supersede philosophy without making it a reality*’.<sup>52</sup> The resolution of real problems, i.e. the necessity ‘*to overthrow all relations* in which man is a debased, enslaved, forsaken, despicable being’, requires that philosophy turns to *practice*, that is, to the masses: ‘The weapon of criticism cannot, of course, replace criticism by weapons, material force must be overthrown by material force; but theory also becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses’.<sup>53</sup> The revolution ‘begins in the brain of the

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<sup>48</sup> CW: 3: 175.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. 176.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. 38-9.

<sup>51</sup> CW: 3: 175-77.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. 181.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. 181-2.



*philosopher*', however such 'revolutions require a *passive* element, a *material* basis. Theory can be realized in a people only insofar as it is the realization of the needs of the people'.<sup>54</sup>

In contrast to his 1843 letters to Ruge, Marx no longer speaks vaguely of "human beings who think" and "human beings who suffer". Instead, philosophy, as part of "the work of united forces" must ally itself with the proletariat:

As philosophy finds its *material* weapons in the proletariat, so the proletariat finds its *spiritual* weapons in philosophy. And once the lightning of thought has squarely struck this ingenuous soil of the people the emancipation of the *Germans* into *human beings* will take place . . . The *emancipation of the German* is the *emancipation of the human being*. The *head* of this emancipation is *philosophy*, its *heart* is the *proletariat*. Philosophy cannot be made a reality without the abolition of the proletariat, the proletariat cannot be abolished without philosophy being made a reality.<sup>55</sup>

Marx's employment of the word "proletariat", which he had not used prior to this text, probably reflects the early impact of Paris on his thinking, and of French socialist and communist tendencies in which, according to Labica, the word was widespread.<sup>56</sup> However, as Callinicos notes, Marx at this point was still far from his later more sophisticated understanding of the proletariat in the technical sense as a distinct class formed within a specific structure of relations of production.<sup>57</sup> True, Marx speaks of the emergence of the proletariat as a result of industrial development.<sup>58</sup> However, the characteristics with which Marx endows the proletariat and which account for its emancipative role suggest that the proletariat operates here more as a philosophical category. It is 'a class with *radical chains*, a class of civil society which is not a class of civil society', and which 'has a universal character by its universal suffering'. It 'does not stand in any one-sided antithesis to the consequences but in all-round antithesis to the premises of the German state'. Finally, it is 'a sphere . . . which cannot emancipate itself without emancipating itself from all other spheres of society and thereby emancipating all other spheres of society, which, in a word, is the *complete loss* of man and hence can win itself only through the *complete rewinning of man*'.<sup>59</sup> In other words, the proletariat is conceived as an expression of alienated man, of the human essence, and the re-appropriation or recovery of true man. As Labica argues, 'The fact of

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid. 182-3.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. 187.

<sup>56</sup> Labica 1980, 101.

<sup>57</sup> Callinicos 1985, 35.

<sup>58</sup> CW: 3: 186.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

alienation, and the fact of its suppression' make up the essence of the proletariat. Thus understood, 'the proletariat would be nothing other than Feuerbach's "alienated man"'.<sup>60</sup>

Nevertheless, despite Marx's abstract conception of the proletariat, Mah is correct in his judgment that the call for an alliance between philosophy and the proletariat as the basis for philosophy's practical realization and supersession represents a denial of the conventional meaning of philosophy, understood as a primarily rational and logical discourse.<sup>61</sup> It could be added, though, that Marx was never really concerned with philosophy in this traditional sense. As we have seen, from his earliest philosophical texts, through to the late 1843 "Introduction", Marx demonstrates a singular concern with the effective power and transformative capacities of philosophy in relation to the real world, that is, with how philosophy can contribute to the elimination of oppressive conditions and institutions hindering the actualization of human freedom and emancipation. And in the "Introduction", we find Marx returning to the theme of his dissertation, in which philosophy must practically realize itself in the world, and in transforming the latter, also brings about its own supersession and superfluity. But, whereas in 1840-41, Bauer provided Marx with a reference point according to which to rethink philosophy in terms of its practical effects in overcoming existing oppressive conditions, by 1843, Marx attempts to situate his reformulation of philosophy in terms of motifs developed by Feuerbach.

The latter, in *The Necessity of a Reform of Philosophy*, draws a sharp distinction between previous traditional philosophy and a qualitatively new philosophy which does not, like traditional "scholastic" philosophy, respond to abstract needs internal to the historical development of philosophy, but rather, finds its basis in the real historical needs of humanity: 'The only true and necessary change in philosophy can be one that harks to the need of the age as well as that of mankind'.<sup>62</sup> This means that the new philosophy finds its basis in the non-philosophical: 'Philosophy has to begin then not so much *with itself* as with its own *antithesis*; i.e. with *non-philosophy*'.<sup>63</sup>

Marx similarly posits the necessity of a philosophy conceived, not as pure criticism and logical argumentation, but rather, as a "worldly" force that finds its basis in the historical needs of "suffering humanity", and which therefore, must respond to the needs of the people.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, his conception of the alliance between theory and the masses, philosophy and the proletariat, relies on a conceptual distinction drawn by Feuerbach. Marx wrote that 'As philosophy finds its *material* weapons in the

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<sup>60</sup> Labica 1980, 100.

<sup>61</sup> Mah 1987, 200-1.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. 146.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. 164.

<sup>64</sup> CW: 3: 182-3.

proletariat, so the proletariat finds its *spiritual* weapons in philosophy . . . The *head* of this emancipation is *philosophy*, its *heart* is the *proletariat*.<sup>65</sup> This language is taken directly from Feuerbach, who wrote that ‘The essential tools and organs of philosophy are: the *head*, which is the source of activity, freedom . . . and idealism, and the *heart*, which is the source of suffering, finiteness, needs, and sensualism’.<sup>66</sup> Thought or philosophy as the need of the “head”, is active, free, and self-determining, while the “heart” is unfree, material, and passive, associated with needs, passions, and suffering.<sup>67</sup> Applied to the relationship between philosophy and the proletariat, the former plays the active, primary role, while the latter is merely the passive material basis for the activity of the former. The revolution ‘begins in the brain of the *philosopher*’, however such ‘revolutions require a *passive* element, a *material* basis’.<sup>68</sup> Philosophy is the “lightning” that strikes the ingenuous soil of the people.<sup>69</sup> Marx looks upon the proletariat only as a passive, suffering class awaiting the active penetration of philosophy, rather than, as he would later view it, the active agent in its own self-emancipation.<sup>70</sup>

On the other hand, the 1843 resemblance between Marx and Feuerbach is to a significant extent, more formal rather than substantive. The differences between them reflect their different concerns and preoccupations. For the latter, the non-philosophical basis and starting point for the new philosophy lies in the sensuous material world of nature: ‘This being which is distinguished from thought, which is unphilosophical, this absolutely *anti-scholastic* being in us is the principle of *sensualism*’.<sup>71</sup> The Feuerbachian premise and fundamental principle of philosophy is anthropological, that is, the essence of “man” conceived as a finite, natural, and sensuous being, existing in the material world within space and time, and who has real biological needs, emotions, and passions.<sup>72</sup> In short, real being, i.e. the essential unity of nature and man is the basis of the new philosophy: ‘it is *the thinking man* himself, i.e., man who *is* and *knows himself* as the self-conscious essence of nature’, and in which nature is ‘the ground of man’.<sup>73</sup>

Marx was certainly cognizant of their differing theoretical preoccupations, an awareness clearly expressed in his 1843 view that ‘Feuerbach’s aphorisms seem to me incorrect only in one respect, that he refers too much to nature and too little to politics. That, however, is the only alliance by which present-

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid. 187.

<sup>66</sup> Feuerbach 1972, 164.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> CW: 3: 182-3.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. 187

<sup>70</sup> Löwy 2005, 57-9.

<sup>71</sup> Feuerbach 1972, 164.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. 153, 156, 159, 163.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. 169.

day philosophy can become truth'.<sup>74</sup> This accounts for the fact that, however much Marx was inspired by Feuerbach's call for a fundamental philosophical reform, the two thinkers have substantially different conceptions concerning the specific nature of this reform. For the 1843 Marx, philosophy must find its basis in politics; only through an alliance of philosophy with politics can the former become true and actual: 'Hence, nothing prevents us from making criticism of politics, participation in politics, and therefore *real* struggles, the starting point of our criticism, and from identifying our criticism with them'.<sup>75</sup>

Thus, while Marx's concept of the proletariat in the "Introduction" seems to function like a synonym for Feuerbach's alienated "man", the very existence of the term "proletariat" is indicative of a fundamental difference between the two thinkers, a term which Marx would not have derived from Feuerbach's work, and which reflects their contrasting concerns.

#### **4.4 The discovery of the working class movement and the turn towards a materialist philosophical humanism**

The "Introduction" represents the endpoint of a transitory stage in Marx's theoretical evolution, stretching from 1840-41 to the end of 1843 and the very beginning of 1844, in which his central concern was to unite philosophy and the world, reason and reality, through the realization of the former in the latter. The realization of philosophy in the world, by transforming the world and making it genuinely "human", would also constitute the simultaneous self-abolition of philosophy. However, under the impact of his systematic study of political economy during the spring and summer of 1844 and, even more so, his early contact with the Parisian labor movement, Marx was led to abandon this problematic and, in particular, the schema of the "head" and "heart", the activity and primacy of philosophy in relation to the passive proletariat.

##### **4.4.1 The workers as active agents**

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<sup>74</sup> CW: 1: 400.

<sup>75</sup> CW: 3: 144.

In Marx's incomplete manuscripts written between April and August 1844, the so-called *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* only fully published in 1932, he no longer believes that the revolution 'begins in the brain of the *philosopher*.'<sup>76</sup> The idea that communism (this is the first text in which Marx explicitly declares his allegiance to communism), as the movement for genuine human emancipation, depends primarily on the critical activity and ideas of philosophers and which would then need only penetrate a passive suffering mass, is rejected. Instead, Marx places emphasis on concrete action and political struggle: 'In order to abolish the *idea* of private property, the *idea* of communism is quite sufficient. It takes *actual* communist action to abolish actual private property'.<sup>77</sup> This point is rendered even clearer in the following passage:

we see how the resolution of the *theoretical* antitheses is *only* possible in a *practical* way, by virtue of the practical energy of man. Their resolution is therefore by no means merely a problem of understanding, but a *real* problem of life, which *philosophy* could not solve precisely because it conceived this problem as *merely* a theoretical one.<sup>78</sup>

To be sure, these arguments are not wholly new. Marx had already made clear in the "Introduction" that the resolution of real world problems could not be solved through purely theoretical means, which was precisely why philosophy had to become a practical, material force by gripping the masses. However now, there seems to be little, if any, role for the "lightning" of philosophy and the activity of philosophers in the revolution. In this connection, we find in a now famous passage, statements that reflect Marx's early contacts with workers' organizations in Paris, and which we would not have found in his 1843 articles for the *Jahrbücher*:

When communist *artisans* associate with one another, theory, propaganda, etc., is their first end. But at the same time, as a result of this association, they acquire a new need - the need for society - and what appears as a means becomes an end. In this practical process the most splendid results are to be observed whenever French socialist workers are seen together. Such things as smoking, drinking, eating, etc., are no longer means of contact or means that bring them together. Association, society and conversation, which again has association as its end, are enough for them; the brotherhood of man is no mere phrase with them, but a fact of life, and the nobility of man shines upon us from their work-hardened bodies.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> CW: 3: 182.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. 313.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid. 302.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid. 313. Cf. also 355.

Such views present a picture quite different from that of a passive suffering mass awaiting the spark of philosophy. Under the impact of his early contacts with the workers' movement, Marx at this time is in the process of increasingly distancing himself from his earlier notion that workers constitute merely the passive, concrete material basis or foundation of the activity of critical thought and philosophy, towards a growing confidence in the capacities of workers to organize, associate, and on this basis, to develop theoretical consciousness.

This change in Marx's perspective, already evident in the *Manuscripts*, is further concretized and solidified in his "critical marginal notes" concerning Ruge's article "The King of Prussia and Social Reform", written in August 1844 following the Silesian weavers' rebellion. In response to Ruge's dismissal of the workers' insurrection, Marx sprang to its defense, arguing that '*not a single one* of the French and English insurrections has had the same *theoretical* and *conscious* character as the Silesian weavers' rebellion'. Here, Marx's break with the opposition between the activity of philosophical thought and passive material practice becomes explicit; the proletariat is now unequivocally identified as 'the active agent of its emancipation', and socialism is associated with working class praxis rather than the critical thought of philosophers.<sup>80</sup> As Löwy argues, there is a 'veritable "qualitative leap" between the Marx of the "Introduction" and the Marx of the Vorwärts article. This evolution can be understood only if we take account of what happened between February and August 1844: Marx's discovery of workers' communism in Paris, the weavers' revolt, etc.'<sup>81</sup> In short, Marx has repudiated the whole 1843 problematic of philosophy becoming real, actual, and "true" through an alliance with politics, together with its concrete expression as the alliance of philosophers with the proletariat, in which the "lightning" of the critical thought of philosophers strikes or penetrates a passive, suffering, and ingenuous proletariat.<sup>82</sup>

#### 4.4.2 Speculative philosophical idealism as an alienated inversion

The new problem that emerges consists in elaborating a conception of communism with a concrete, empirical foundation in the analysis of political economy. Against the philosophical and utopian forms of communism, Marx propounds that 'the entire revolutionary movement necessarily finds both its empirical and its theoretical basis in the movement of *private property* - more precisely, in that of the

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<sup>80</sup> CW: 3: 201-2.

<sup>81</sup> Löwy 2005, 95.

<sup>82</sup> CW: 3: 187.

economy'.<sup>83</sup> Indeed, the *Manuscripts* are the first of Marx's writings to reflect his serious confrontation with political economy.<sup>84</sup>

Once again, Marx attempts to situate this theoretical program, and in particular the critique of political economy within the framework of Feuerbach's philosophical achievements. Here, as in 1843, Feuerbach's critique of speculative philosophy is crucial in paving the way for the analysis of "real man" as a concrete, material and social being. By unmasking the heavenly and otherworldly forms of human self-alienation in theology and the idealist metaphysics of the modern speculative philosophical tradition, and its culmination in Hegel, Feuerbach had provided the necessary theoretical basis for the analysis of the real world of man, and thus, of Marx's own critical project of uncovering the "unholy" forms of human alienation in the real, concrete material and social world. And, in fact, Marx situates his critique of political economy within this framework, the central objective of which consists in unmasking human alienation and estrangement in the economic realm, i.e. in relations of private property.<sup>85</sup>

Thus, Marx posits that Feuerbach is 'the true conqueror of the old philosophy', because of his 'proof that philosophy is nothing else but religion rendered into thought and expounded by thought, i.e., another form and manner of existence of the estrangement of the essence of man; hence equally to be condemned'.<sup>86</sup> Marx's scathing critique of philosophical idealism in the *Manuscripts* is driven by the Feuerbachian conception of philosophy as a speculative inversion of subject and predicate, reality and thought, the essential unity of human beings with the concrete, sensuous material world of nature and abstract philosophical categories, a reversal which constitutes a form of human self-estrangement. Accordingly, we find Marx repeating, to a significant extent, the criticisms of Hegel's speculative philosophy made in his 1843 critique of the *Philosophy of Right*. While Hegel's great achievement, according to Marx, is that he 'conceives the self-creation of man as a process, conceives objectification as loss of the object, as alienation and as transcendence of this alienation', 'The *human character* of nature and of the nature created by history - man's products - appears in the form that they are *products* of abstract mind and as such, therefore, phases of mind - thought entities'.<sup>87</sup> Employing the Feuerbachian discourse with which we are familiar, for Hegel,

the subject knowing itself as absolute self-consciousness - is therefore *God, absolute Spirit, the self-knowing and self-manifesting idea*. Real man and real nature become mere predicates -

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid. 297.

<sup>84</sup> It was during his stay in Paris that he conducted a sustained, systematic study of the subject beginning in April 1844, reading the works of the great classical political economists, Rubel and Manale 1975, 42.

<sup>85</sup> CW: 3: 270-2.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid. 328.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid. 332-3.

symbols of this hidden unreal man and of this unreal nature. Subject and predicate are therefore related to each other in absolute reversal - a *mystical subject-object*.<sup>88</sup>

Consequently, Hegel 'has only found the abstract, logical, speculative expression of the movement of history, which is not yet the real history of man as a given subject'.<sup>89</sup> His speculative philosophical dialectic is a lucid exemplar or embodiment of the nature or essence of the "old" philosophy. Marx contends that Hegel's speculative logic 'is in its entirety nothing but the *display . . .* of the *essence* of the philosophic mind, and the philosophic mind is nothing but the estranged mind of the world thinking within its self-estrangement - i.e., comprehending itself abstractly', or as he put it elsewhere, 'that which constitutes the *essence* of philosophy' is 'the *alienation of man who knows himself*, or *alienated science thinking itself*'.<sup>90</sup> Hence, the nature or essence of the old speculative philosophy consists in alienated man thinking his own alienation. It is the conceptual and theoretical expression of man's self-alienation, and therefore, philosophy is nothing but the reflection of human self-alienation expressed in thought, in abstraction. Consequently, 'The *philosopher . . .* is himself an abstract form of estranged man'.<sup>91</sup> In this way, Marx adopts Feuerbach's own project of overthrowing traditional speculative philosophy, who had already contended that just as 'The essence of theology is the *transcendent*; i.e., the essence of man posited outside man', so 'The essence of Hegel's *Logic* is *transcendent* thought; i.e., the thought of man *posited outside man*. Just as theology *dichotomizes* and *externalizes*' the essence of man, 'The *Absolute Spirit* of Hegel is none other than *abstract* spirit, i.e., *finite* spirit that has been separated from itself'. 'Hegelian philosophy', for Feuerbach, 'has alienated man *from himself* in so far as its whole system is based on these acts of abstraction'.<sup>92</sup>

#### 4.4.3 Materialist philosophical humanism

Marx evidently considers himself to be an exponent of Feuerbach's positive programmatic alternative as well. In place of the metaphysics of speculative philosophical idealism, Feuerbach had established '*true materialism*', and '*real science*', by making the social relationship of "man to man" the

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid. 342.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid. 329.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid. 330, 333.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid. 331.

<sup>92</sup> Feuerbach 1972, 156-7, 153, 168.



basic principle' of theory.<sup>93</sup> Moreover, 'It is only with *Feuerbach* that *positive*, humanistic and naturalistic criticism begins'. In doing so, he had 'whether intentionally or not, provided 'a philosophical basis for socialism'.<sup>94</sup>

Marx is referring to Feuerbach's materialist and naturalist humanism. The latter's principal aim, in combating the modern speculative philosophical tradition, had been that of vindicating a materialist realism. By means of the "reformatory critique", i.e. the critical method of inversion, in which Hegel and the metaphysical idealism of the modern speculative philosophical tradition are stood on its feet, Feuerbach aimed to restore ontological primacy to the finite, determinate, and real, i.e. the sensuous material world.<sup>95</sup> This doctrine is clearly enunciated in the preface to the second edition of *The Essence of Christianity*, written around the same time as the *Principles*:

I completely and unconditionally reject *absolute, immaterial, self-complacent* speculation - that speculation which generates its material *out of itself*. I am worlds apart from those philosophers who pluck out their eyes to be able to see better; I base my thoughts on *materials* that are given to us only through the activity of the senses; I do not produce the object out of the thought but, rather, the thought *out of the object*, for *that* alone is an object that exists *apart from the brain* . . . I subscribe - in direct contrast to the philosophy of Hegel, which holds exactly the opposite view - to *realism* or materialism in the mentioned sense.<sup>96</sup>

Concomitant with Feuerbach's attempt to vindicate a materialist realism was an understanding of human beings as material, sensuous beings existing in an essential unity with the natural world. Human beings are sensuous, objective beings in the sense that they necessarily relate to an objective reality (nature) outside of themselves on the basis, not only of sense perceptions in the strict sense, but more broadly, of their fundamental natural, biological and physiological needs. Nature, i.e. sensuous material reality, is an essential object for "man" insofar as it is only through his necessary relation to this "other", which is a real "other" rather than simply the phenomenological "other" of thought itself, that "man" really is what he is. In other words, it is through human beings' necessary and vital relation to nature that they display and manifest their essential nature or essence.<sup>97</sup> Thus, for Feuerbach, 'The new philosophy makes *man, together with nature* as the basis of man, the *exclusive, universal, and highest object* of philosophy; it makes *anthropology, together with physiology, the universal science*'. And the 'essence of

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<sup>93</sup> CW: 3: 328.

<sup>94</sup> CW: 3: 232, 354.

<sup>95</sup> Feuerbach 1972, 159.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid. 252.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid. 180-1.

man' is contained in *communal and social life*', that is, '*the unity of man with man*'.<sup>98</sup> Materialism, realism, empiricism, and humanism, are all terms used interchangeably by Feuerbach to represent the "sciences of the real", i.e. his own distinctive philosophical principle of sensuousness, in contrast to metaphysical idealism and philosophical speculation.<sup>99</sup>

If Marx no longer criticizes Feuerbach for his emphasis on nature as the basic principle of the new philosophy, as he had in 1843, but contrariwise, is emphatic in his praise of Feuerbach's establishment of '*true materialism*', and '*real science*', and of his naturalistic humanism as providing the genuine philosophical foundations of socialism and the critique of political economy, this is because Feuerbach's materialist realism and his corresponding conception of human beings as natural, material, and sensuous beings provides Marx with the necessary *theoretical premise* on which to develop his critique of political economy in terms of estranged labor, and therefore, his broader conceptualization of human history.

Following Feuerbach, Marx posits that

*Man is directly a natural being . . . as a natural, corporeal, sensuous, objective being he is a suffering, conditioned and limited creature, like animals and plants. That is to say, the objects of his instincts exist outside him, as objects independent of him; yet these objects are objects that he needs - essential objects, indispensable to the manifestation and confirmation of his essential powers. To say that man is a corporeal, living, real, sensuous, objective being full of natural vigor is to say that he has real, sensuous objects as the object of his being or of his life, or that he can only express his life in real, sensuous objects.*<sup>100</sup>

'To be objective, natural, and sensuous', means having an 'object, nature and sense outside oneself'. Marx gives the example of hunger, which as a natural need requires an objective natural world outside oneself for its fulfillment.<sup>101</sup> Hence, for both Feuerbach and Marx (who here is simply adopting the former's position), human beings are sensuous beings who are finite and limited creatures like other organisms, and who necessarily relate to a natural, physical world of objects existing outside themselves on the basis of needs. Furthermore, only through this "essential" relationship to their natural environment are human beings what they are, that is, their nature manifested and expressed.

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid. 243-5.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid. 195-6, 224.

<sup>100</sup> CW: 3: 336.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 337.

Nevertheless, in the *Manuscripts*, as Callinicos correctly argues,<sup>102</sup> Marx begins to articulate a conception of human nature that fundamentally diverges from that of Feuerbach. For Marx, humans are laboring and producing beings. This conscious laboring activity enables humans to actively shape and fundamentally transform their natural environment. According to Marx,

It is just in his work upon the objective world that man proves himself to be a *species-being*. This production is his active species-life. Through this production, nature appears as his work and his reality. The object of labor is therefore the *objectification of man's species-life*. For he duplicates himself not only as in consciousness, intellectually, but also actively in reality, and therefore he sees himself in a world that he has created.<sup>103</sup>

By actively reshaping the objective world and fashioning new objects and products through their labor, human beings confront a world that bears the marks of their essential life activity, and in which the transformed world serves as a type of concrete testimony to their human essential powers. It is in this sense that one can understand Marx's view that 'In creating a *world of objects* by his practical activity, in his *work upon* inorganic nature, man proves himself a conscious species-being'.<sup>104</sup> Through genuinely human productive activity, i.e. that activity which is conscious, free, and objectifying, humans also confirm their essential nature as social and communal beings, for in objectifying and confirming their essential nature in their freely created products, they have the pleasure of knowing that their products are satisfying the needs of other human beings. Thus, one's individual production not only confirms their essential individual nature, but also the collective social nature of "man" as a whole.<sup>105</sup>

This conception of human nature in terms of labor underlies Marx's critique of political economy in the *Manuscripts*, and his whole account of history and the nature of communism. Apprehending the laws and facts of political economy, along with their basis in private property, requires the analysis of estranged labor, and thus, Marx's concept of human nature. Under capitalist relations of private property, humans are not able to labor and produce in accordance with their essential nature. Rather than freely appropriating the objects and products of their labor, and seeing in them the concrete confirmation of their essential powers, 'the object which labor produces - labor's product - confronts it as *something alien*, as a *power independent* of the producer'. The objectification of the human essence in material products, instead of constituting a form of confirmation and realization of human labor, represents estrangement

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<sup>102</sup> Callinicos 1985, 37.

<sup>103</sup> CW: 3: 277.

<sup>104</sup> CW: 3: 276

<sup>105</sup> Ibid. 227-8.

and alienation.<sup>106</sup> Here, Marx applies the structure of religious alienation in Feuerbach to his own account of this aspect of estranged labor. Just as for Feuerbach, and in particular his *Essence of Christianity*, man divests himself of his own nature, his own qualities and attributes by displacing these onto a fictional God, so as a result of the alienation of man's labor in relations of private property, the wealth and products of his labor confront him 'as *something alien*, as a *power independent* of the producer'.<sup>107</sup> Just as for Feuerbach, religious alienation represents the denial or depreciation of man and his essential nature, as for example, when writes that 'To enrich God, man must become poor; that God may be all, man must be nothing',<sup>108</sup> so Marx argues that 'the more the worker spends himself, the more powerful becomes the alien world of objects which he creates over and against himself, the poorer he himself . . . becomes, the less belongs to him as his own'.<sup>109</sup> Man is not only alienated from the products of his labor, but also from labor itself, both of which become an external and independent power over man. Marx sees these two aspects of estranged labor as closely connected: 'in the estrangement of the object of labor is merely summarized the estrangement, the alienation, in the activity of labor itself'.<sup>110</sup> Under the dominion of capital, humans no longer freely and consciously express themselves through their labor, since the conditions of labor and the production process are outside of their control: 'labor is therefore not voluntary, but coerced; it is *forced labor*'.<sup>111</sup> In this sense, 'The external character of labor for the worker appears' in the fact that it is controlled and commanded by someone else, i.e. the capitalist.<sup>112</sup> Labor is no longer experienced as a form of fulfillment, but is reduced to a mere means to 'physical existence'.<sup>113</sup> The broader consequences of the alienation of labor consist in our alienation from nature and from other human beings. Humans' essential unity with nature, that is, the natural, necessary, and continuous interchange between the two is torn asunder, i.e. nature is taken away from him and becomes something alien,<sup>114</sup> while on the other hand, the estrangement of human beings from their species-essence 'means that one man is estranged from the other'. For Marx, 'An immediate consequence of the fact that man is estranged from the product of his labor, from his life activity, from his species-being is the *estrangement of man from man*'.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid. 272.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid. 272.

<sup>108</sup> Feuerbach 1983, 150-1.

<sup>109</sup> CW: 3: 272.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid. 274.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid. 277.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid. 276-7.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid. 277.

#### 4.4.4 History as alienation and communism as the re-appropriation of the human essence

Marx presents a philosophical account of history as a movement of alienation and disalienation rather similar in structure to Feuerbach and Hegel. Human self-estrangement in private property is a necessary stage before this alienation can be transcended through communism,<sup>116</sup> the latter Marx defines as

The real *appropriation* of the *human* essence by and for man: communism therefore as the complete return of man to himself as a social (i.e. human) being . . . It is the *genuine* resolution of the conflict between man and nature and between man and man - the true resolution of the strife between existence and essence, between objectification and self-confirmation, between freedom and necessity, between the individual species. Communism is the riddle of history solved.<sup>117</sup>

Communism is thus, the full realization of the true nature of man as an essentially natural and social being, i.e. a movement of disalienation beyond which lies a truly human society. Just as 'Atheism is humanism mediated with itself through the supersession of religion', so 'communism is humanism mediated with itself through the supersession of private property'.<sup>118</sup> Communism is 'the negation of the negation . . . the appropriation of the human essence through the intermediary of the negation of private property'.<sup>119</sup> In short, Marx presents a metaphysical and teleological conception of history centered on his understanding of the human essence in terms labor, human alienation in the estrangement of labor, and its overcoming, and in which communism represents the practical transcendence of alienation, while on the other hand, the proletariat is primarily treated as an alienated class. As Callinicos argues,

At the core of the *Manuscripts* is a teleological philosophy of history in which the development of social forms is explained by their role in bringing about the culmination of the historical process, communism . . . An explanatory apparatus is provided by Marx's concept of human nature and by the Hegelian dialectic, in the sense of the triadic structure through which the subject of history must pass to realize its full potential.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid. 333.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid. 296-7.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid. 341.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid. 313.

<sup>120</sup> Callinicos 1985, 42.

Rather than being a task for philosophy and the philosophers to solve, the cleavage between “existence” and “essence”, what “is” and what “ought” to be, real and rational, will be overcome as the result of a dialectical historical necessity.

Overall, there is a significant tension traversing Marx’s appeal to Feuerbach in the *Manuscripts*. On one hand, it is understandable that Marx would seek in Feuerbach the basic conceptual framework for his project of elaborating a conception of communism that finds its theoretical basis in the real historical process, and its underlying basis in economic relations of labor and the production process. The latter’s radical critique of speculative philosophy and its idealist metaphysics was a prerequisite for any genuine analysis of the real world, i.e. of the actual concrete social existence and development of human beings. Hegel’s speculative philosophy had ‘only found the *abstract, logical, speculative* expression for the movement of history, which is not yet the *real* history of man as a given subject’.<sup>121</sup> Nor could a theoretical basis for the understanding of “real man” be found in left-Hegelians like Strauss or Bauer, both of whose conceptions of man remained abstractly conceived within the terms of consciousness, and who, for Marx, had remained within the more general confines of Hegel.<sup>122</sup> Only a consistent naturalism and humanism ‘is capable of comprehending the action of world history’.<sup>123</sup> In other words, Marx’s attempt to account for the real process of human development, and its basis in labor and production requires Feuerbach’s conception of humans as real, concrete material and social beings existing within nature. The latter’s conception of humans as objective, natural and sensuous beings existing in an essential relation with external nature on the basis of sensuous needs, provides the starting point for Marx’s analysis of human historical development in terms of labor: ‘The worker can create nothing without *nature*, without the *sensuous external world*. It is the material on which his labor is realized, in which it is active, from which and by means of which it produces’.<sup>124</sup> In short, it is only because humans are objective, natural, and sensuous beings that they are also fundamentally laboring and producing beings.

On the other hand, Marx, only implicitly however, recognizes the limitations of Feuerbach’s naturalist humanism insofar as he detects in Hegel (and not Feuerbach) the conceptual elements of an understanding of human historical self-development in primarily *active* terms. Hegel was able to grasp ‘the self-creation of man as a process, conceives objectification as loss of the object, as alienation and as transcendence of this alienation’. He ‘thus grasps the essence of *labor* and comprehends objective man - true, because real man - as the outcome of man’s *own labor*’, in short, the ‘*real, active* orientation of man

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<sup>121</sup> CW: 3: 329.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid. 327.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid. 336.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid. 273.

to himself'.<sup>125</sup> However, this was only apprehended by Hegel in abstract, speculative terms since the subject of this historical process is man understood only in terms of consciousness. For Hegel, 'only *mind* is the *true* essence of man, and the true form of mind is thinking mind, the logical, speculative mind'. Thus, his depiction of the process of man's self-estrangement is one in which man, as *in itself* abstract consciousness estranges himself in thought-objects, before arriving at self-consciousness. 'The distinct forms of estrangement which make their appearance are, therefore, only various forms of consciousness and self-consciousness', the result of whose movement consists in absolute knowledge, 'the identity of self-consciousness and consciousness', in short, 'the dialectic of pure thought'.<sup>126</sup> Hence, although 'Hegel's standpoint is that of modern political economy', since 'He grasps *labor* as the *essence* of man', the problem is that 'The only labor which Hegel knows and recognizes is *abstractly mental* labor'.<sup>127</sup> Consequently, Hegel was only able to grasp man's active historical self-development in its abstract, alienated form or expression within the terms of speculative philosophy, i.e. as a movement of alienation and disalienation taking place inside thinking, and therefore, in actuality, '*man's coming-to-be for himself* within *alienation*, or as *alienated man*'.<sup>128</sup>

There is, in other words, an explicable logic underlying Marx's peculiar fusion of Feuerbach and Hegel in the *Manuscripts*, one which furthermore, brings us to the threshold of Marx's famous "synthesis" of materialism and idealism in the first thesis on Feuerbach. Marx's account of history in terms of human labor and the production process necessitates a materialistic and naturalistic understanding of human beings, but one which can also take into account human *sensuous* practical activity, hence, not the notion of activity as mental labor and thinking activity as found in Hegel's *Phenomenology*.

Finally, there is the problem posed by Marx's re-conceptualization of human nature in terms of labor. For this conception, as Callinicos points out, implies that human needs and capacities change over time as they develop and expand their human productive powers. As Marx said, 'the history of *industry* and the established *objective* existence of industry are the *open* book of *man's essential powers*'. Hence, at the same time that this conception of the human essence grounds his teleological philosophy of history, it undermines itself from playing this role since it suggests the need to abandon the philosophical metaphysics of "man" and the human essence as the explanatory ground and basis of the historical process.<sup>129</sup> Only with the *Theses* would Marx demonstrate an explicit awareness of the limitations of

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid. 332-3.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid. 332.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid. 333.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Callinicos 1985, 42-3.

Feuerbach's materialist and naturalistic humanism, and in particular, the latter's concept of sensibility (*Sinnlichkeit*) that constitutes its basis.

#### 4.4.5 Materialist philosophical humanism as the framework for a proletarian-based communism

In his last key text before the *Theses*, *The Holy Family* or "Critique of Critical Criticism", written from September to November 1844, Marx does not yet demonstrate any cognizance of Feuerbach's limitations. On the contrary, in this lengthy work, the central objective of which consisted in an extensive critique of the speculative abstractions of Bruno Bauer and his cohorts, and which was also the first collaborative work produced by Marx with Engels, both men present themselves as exponents of Feuerbach's materialist humanism against the metaphysical idealism of German speculative philosophy. This emerges at the very outset, in which German speculative idealism, whose nonsense had reached its peak in Bauer's obsession with the critical critique of "self-consciousness" or "spirit", is declared to be the most dangerous enemy of "real humanism".<sup>130</sup> Critical criticism had not succeeded in extricating itself from the confines of Hegel's speculative philosophy, the former seeing in reality only categories, and who therefore, reduce the real world of human activity and practice to a dialectical process of mere thought, and see in practice only a practice of abstract thought.<sup>131</sup> When they speak of man, 'it does not mean the concrete, but the abstract, the idea, the spirit, etc.'. <sup>132</sup> In contrast, Feuerbach 'annihilated the dialectics of concepts', he had overcome the abstractions of "infinite self-consciousness" and discovered the significance of "real man".<sup>133</sup> We see here a continuation of the arguments Marx made in the *Manuscripts*, in which a concrete conception of man could not be ascertained in the thinking of other left Hegelians such as Straus and Bauer, but only with Feuerbach:

*Feuerbach, who completed and criticized Hegel from Hegel's point of view by resolving the metaphysical Absolute Spirit into "real man on the basis of nature", was the first to complete the criticism of religion by sketching in a grand and masterly manner the basic features of the criticism of Hegel's speculation and hence of all metaphysics.*<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> CW: 4: 7.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid. 92, 53, 40.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid. 93.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid. 139.



Marx has not yet found an exit from philosophy. The central opposition here, as in the *Manuscripts*, is not that between philosophy and non-philosophy, but rather, that between speculative metaphysical philosophy, and an alternative, concrete and anti-metaphysical philosophy. ‘*Feuerbach*, in his first resolute attack on *Hegel*, counterposed *sober philosophy* to *wild speculation*’, i.e. “*speculative German philosophy*”, “*speculative metaphysics*”, “*metaphysics in general*”.<sup>135</sup>

At another level, *The Holy Family* is of interest insofar as it continues to build on the themes that began to emerge in the *Manuscripts* and which were further concretized in the *Vorwärts* article, namely, that of elaborating a mass, proletarian-based communism rooted in working class praxis, which here is developed in radical opposition to the views of Bauer and his associates. For the latter, the human struggle for liberation hinged simply on a struggle of critical thought, of “critical criticism”, without any consideration of real, objective material conditions, that is, the real world. Indeed, we have already seen earlier in this chapter, the serious limitations of Bauer’s celebration of the infinite transformative capacities of self-consciousness, and of theoretical critique whose only conception of practice was a purely theoretical one. Thus, Marx continues his earlier criticisms according to which the problems of the real world cannot be solved by means of mere theoretical critique, but require an actual practical transformation of real world conditions. In direct contraposition to Critical Criticism’s demand simply to struggle against the illusions of consciousness, to alter thinking, to change their “abstract ego” in consciousness, Marx propounds a ‘*mass-type*, profane communism’, whose ‘first proposition . . . rejects emancipation *in mere theory* as an illusion’ and which ‘considers material, practical upheavals necessary even to win the time and means required merely to occupy itself with “*theory*”!’<sup>136</sup> Marx bases his communism on the

*mass-minded*, communist workers, employed, for instance, in the Manchester or Lyons workshops . . . [who] . . . do not believe that by “*pure thinking*” they will be able to argue away their industrial masters and their own practical debasement. They are most painfully aware of the *difference* between *being* and *thinking*, between *consciousness* and *life*. They know that property, capital, money, wage-labor and the like are no ideal figments of the brain but very practical, very objective products of their self-estrangement and that therefore they must be abolished in a practical, objective way.<sup>137</sup>

In criticizing Bauer, as Löwy contends, *The Holy Family* ‘continues and deepens the ideas outlined in the *Vorwärts* article, until it becomes a veritable “self-criticism” of the “Introduction”’, and in

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid. 125.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid. 53, 95.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid. 53.

so doing, ‘Marx draws nearer to the idea of proletarian self-emancipation’.<sup>138</sup> Thus, he criticizes Bauer’s elitist conception of the working masses as the miserable and contemptible adversary of the critical thought of self-consciousness or spirit, in which ‘On the one side is the Mass as the passive, spiritless, unhistorical, *material* element of history. On the other is *the Spirit, Criticism*, Herr Bauer and Co. as the active element from which all *historical* action proceeds. The act of transforming society is reduced to the *cerebral activity* of Critical Criticism’.<sup>139</sup> In this view, the active element of history and social change is sought ‘exclusively in a *handful* of chosen men, in Herr *Bauer* and his disciples’.<sup>140</sup> Although Marx certainly never went as far as Bauer in this elitist direction, Löwy is nevertheless right to highlight, at the very least, the similar conceptual structure between Bauer’s contraposition of Spirit to Matter, the activity of critical thought to the passive and spiritless masses, and Marx’s early 1844 view in the “Introduction”, according to which the “lightning” of philosophical thought constitutes the “spiritual weapons” in the revolution, while the proletariat is a passive, suffering, material basis of the former.

Marx’s identification of his communism with the revolutionary proletarian masses, as a real practical movement to transform actual objective material conditions represents the antidote to Critical Criticism, that is, the purely speculative theoretical activity of Spirit and self-consciousness. Bauer’s philosophy of self-consciousness, as Marx says in a passage whose Feuerbachian underpinnings are palpable, ‘is the instrument to sublimate into mere *appearance* and *pure* thought all that affirms a *finite* material existence *outside infinite self-consciousness*. What he combats’ is ‘nature both as it exists *outside* man and as man’s nature’. He fails

to recognize any *being* distinct from thought, any *natural energy* distinct from the *spontaneity of the spirit*, any *power of human nature* distinct from *reason*, any *passivity* distinct from *activity* . . . any *feeling* or *willing* distinct from *knowing*, any *heart* distinct from the *head*, any *object* distinct from the *subject*, any *practice* distinct from *theory*, any *man* distinct from the *Critic*, any *real community* distinct from *abstract generality*, any *Thou* distinct from *I*.<sup>141</sup>

Thus, we once again find ourselves within the terms of Feuerbach’s now familiar conceptual distinction between ‘the *head*’ which is ‘the source of activity, freedom, metaphysical infinity, and idealism’, and ‘the *heart*’ which is associated with suffering, finiteness, needs, passivity, in short, the distinction between “*German metaphysics*” and “*French sensualism and materialism*”.<sup>142</sup> However, Marx’s position

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<sup>138</sup> Löwy 2005, 97-8.

<sup>139</sup> CW: 4: 86.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid. 141-2.

<sup>142</sup> Feuerbach 1972, 164-5.

is now diametrically opposed to his early 1844 view that ‘As philosophy finds its *material* weapons in the proletariat, so the proletariat finds its *spiritual* weapons in philosophy . . . The *head* of this emancipation is *philosophy*, its *heart* is the *proletariat*.<sup>143</sup> Contrariwise, Marx now favors the “French heart” and the primacy of changing circumstances.<sup>144</sup> As Löwy again perceptively argues,

This key notion, that it is real, “external” conditions and not consciousness, the “ego”, that has to be changed first, was not new. We find it already in the 18<sup>th</sup> century materialists, which at once explains why Marx, in *The Holy Family*, not only defends French materialism against the attacks of “Bruno Bauer and Co.,” but even maintains that one of the 18<sup>th</sup> century tendencies - the “non-Cartesian” branch of materialism - “leads directly to *socialism* and *communism*”.<sup>145</sup>

On the basis of Locke’s sensationalism, which demonstrated ‘the origin of all human knowledge and ideas from the world of sensation’, Condillac had shown that the senses ‘are matters of *experience* and *habit*’, and that ‘The whole development of man therefore depends on *education* and *external circumstances*’.<sup>146</sup> Helvetius too, basing himself on Locke’s materialism, had applied it to social life, demonstrating ‘the omnipotence of education’.<sup>147</sup> More generally, according to Marx, the 18<sup>th</sup> century French materialism inspired by Locke ‘leads directly to *socialism* and *communism*’:

There is no need for any great penetration to see from the teaching of materialism on the original goodness and equal intellectual endowment of men, the omnipotence of experience, habit and education, and the influence of environment on man, the great significance of industry, the justification of enjoyment, etc., how necessarily materialism is connected with communism and socialism. If man draws all his knowledge, sensation, etc., from the world of the senses and the experience gained in it, then what has to be done is to arrange the empirical world in such a way that man experiences and becomes accustomed to what is truly human in it and that he becomes aware of himself as man.<sup>148</sup>

Put succinctly, ‘If man is shaped by environment, his environment must be made human’.<sup>149</sup> This key doctrine leads directly to the communism of Fourier, the Babouvists, Owen, Cabet, and also ‘the more scientific French communists, *Dezamy*, *Gay* and others’, who ‘developed the teaching of

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid. 187.

<sup>144</sup> Löwy 2005, 100.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid 99.

<sup>146</sup> CW: 4: 129.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid. 130.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid. 131.

*materialism* as the teaching of *real humanism* and the *logical* basis of *communism*'.<sup>150</sup> In Marx's view, 'just as *Feuerbach* is the representative of *materialism* coinciding with *humanism* in the *theoretical* domain, French and English *socialism* and *communism* represent *materialism* coinciding with *humanism* in the *practical* domain'.

Thus, the supersession of idealist metaphysical philosophy and its replacement with a realist philosophical materialism and sensualism is a prerequisite for an understanding and analysis of the real, objective, and concrete social world of actual human beings, and therefore, for the elaboration of a realistic political program of human liberation aimed at its transformation. Marx accordingly pays homage both to the struggle of 18<sup>th</sup> century French materialism against 17<sup>th</sup> century metaphysics, and Feuerbach's contemporary importance in counteracting the revival of metaphysics in the Hegelian speculative philosophy of 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany. On the philosophical foundations of sensuous materialism could be constructed an understanding of the ways in which human beings are shaped and conditioned by their concrete, material and social circumstances, and on this basis, a political project of transforming these objective, material and social circumstances in order that humans can live in accordance with their true nature and essence. Since humans are products of their social environment, the transmutation of the latter would yield the desired result for the true realization of the former. It is a question, as Marx puts it, of re-arranging the social and 'empirical world in such a way that man experiences and becomes accustomed to what is truly human in it and that he becomes aware of himself as man'.<sup>151</sup> Hence, for Marx, there is an indissoluble nexus between philosophical, that is, materialist humanism 'in the *theoretical* domain', and materialist humanism 'in the *practical* domain', i.e. the domain of politics, just as there is an inseparable bond between speculative philosophical idealism and an idealism in the practical domain of politics, as is clear in the case of Herr Bauer and Co. It is along these lines that Marx, by identifying himself with the whole tradition of 18<sup>th</sup> century French philosophical materialism and Feuerbach's 19<sup>th</sup> century theoretical materialist humanism, also identifies himself with English and French socialism and communism, i.e. the materialist tradition as extended and applied to the practical, political domain.

In short, on the philosophical foundation of materialist humanism, Marx elaborates his materialist, proletarian-based communism as a politics of the concrete, practical transformation of objective material and social circumstances. The proletarian masses, without the "help" of "spiritual enlightenment" from Critical Criticism, will develop consciousness of the conditions, or 'life-situation' in which they are impoverished and dehumanized as a prelude to the transformation of these conditions and

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid. 130.

circumstances and thus their own emancipation, and which is tantamount to the transition from conditions of the complete loss of man to those in which the re-appropriation of man can occur.<sup>152</sup>

This framework would not last long. Only months later, Marx would compose his famous notes on Feuerbach, in which he accomplished his break with the latter's materialist philosophical humanism. The consequences of this rupture will severely impact Marx's critical framework for understanding philosophy. No longer will he need to repudiate philosophical idealism by appealing to the modern materialist philosophical tradition, or to a humanist essentialism. Nor will he need this same philosophical schema in order to ground his proletarian-based revolutionary communism. With the development of a coherent conception of the fundamental nature of the historical process, and a coherent revolutionary theory of communism, Marx breaks with philosophy *tout court*. In the following chapter, I examine the nature of this rupture and its consequences.

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid. 36-7, 84, 135.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Praxis, ideology, and philosophy**

#### **5.1 From praxis to the rupture with all philosophy**

The previous chapter attempted to argue that Marx's endeavor to rethink philosophy as a practical and emancipative political force in the social struggle for human liberation was a transient affair that he superseded once he came to recognize the independent capacities of the workers for self-organization and self-education through revolutionary struggle. He attempted to situate his newly-won proletarian-based conception of revolutionary communism within the framework of the modern materialist philosophical and political traditions, and in particular within the terms of Feuerbach's materialist humanism. This in turn had consistently provided the basis for Marx's principal criticism of philosophical idealism as a speculative inversion of the relation between reality and thought, understood as a form of self-estrangement of "real man".

This chapter analyzes the nature of the fundamental rupture with this framework that Marx accomplishes in the *Theses*, and its immediate, yet enduring, impact on the way in which he conceives philosophy as a whole, as this manifests itself in *The German Ideology* written not long after, and which can be legitimately regarded as Marx's last word on philosophical matters, the culmination of a protracted and complicated intellectual journey. I argue indeed that the paradigm-shift that occurs in the *Theses* finds its matrix in the novel concept of praxis contained therein, which as I suggest, must be analytically differentiated according to two quite different meanings that are nevertheless, united by a common conceptual structure. With the concept of sensuous human praxis grasped as labor, Marx succeeds in transcending the limits of Feuerbach's materialist philosophical humanism, and with that, also the modern materialist philosophical tradition more broadly. Sensuous human praxis provides the basic framework within which the transformation of the material world and human beings themselves, including their thought, coincide. This is the foundation on which Marx breaks with Feuerbach's humanist essentialism, enabling him to grasp human nature historically in terms of the ensemble of social relations within which labor is organized. Sensuous human praxis forms the conceptual substrate for the conception of human history that Marx elaborates in *The German Ideology*. On the other hand, with the concept of revolutionary praxis, understood politically, the revolutionary transformation of material, social, and political circumstances coincides with the self-transformation and education of the revolutionary agents

themselves. It is revolutionary, practical-critical, activity, on the basis of which Marx is able to grasp the transformation of circumstances and human consciousness as a simultaneous and unitary process, thereby breaking with the materialist political tradition that he had earlier espoused in *The Holy Family*. The concept of revolutionary praxis is the theoretical nucleus for a coherent revolutionary theory of communism as proletarian self-liberation that Marx elaborates in *The German Ideology*.

I go on to argue that Marx's critique, in *The German Ideology*, of philosophy as an ideological form that emerges out of the basic conceptual framework sketched in the *Theses* is traversed by a tension between, on the one hand, an understanding of ideology and philosophy as primarily speculative distortions and illusions, and on the other, as functional to ruling class domination. In the former, the categories of sensuous human praxis and the inner strife of the ensemble of social relations from the *Theses*, become, in *The German Ideology*, the conceptual foundations of the empirical and scientific ground of history constituted by the mode of production and corresponding forms of intercourse, i.e. the diametric opposite of the speculative illusions of ideology, especially philosophy, but which is also the explanatory basis and foundation of the origin and constitution of ideological mystification. In this case, Marx's chief innovation in *The German Ideology* with respect to his earlier work consists in having applied Feuerbach's metaphor of inversion, not simply to German speculative philosophy and idealist metaphysics, but to philosophy *tout court*, and which he can now, in the wake of the theoretical rupture accomplished in the *Theses*, explain historically in terms of class relations and the division between material and mental labor.

In the latter perspective, by contrast, the same concepts from the *Theses* according to which theories and ideas are historically rooted in praxis, and hence, find their "earthly" basis in the inner strife of the social relations, furnished Marx with an alternative framework within which to grasp the necessary class character of all consciousness, and therefore, to analyze ideas in terms of their functioning in relations of class conflict. This generated an analysis of ideological and philosophical forms as efficacious modes of cementing class power. Within this schema, I argue that Marx genuinely overturned the traditional concept of philosophy, by rethinking it in terms of its ideological functionality to class rule. Such a conception, which approaches Gramsci's own, remained however, only implicit, as Marx much more forcefully posed the question of ideology and philosophy in terms of illusion and distortion, to be contrasted with scientific knowledge of material and social relations.

I conclude the chapter by contending that the political theory of communism as the revolutionary self-liberation of the proletariat, whose basic seeds emerged in the *Theses*, and were then further expanded upon in *The German Ideology*, represents the ultimate repudiation of all philosophy. In the face

of the purely speculative and interpretive activity of the philosophers and intellectuals, who demand that we merely interpret, Marx posited the proletariat as the practical agents of their own revolutionary self-emancipation. Proletarian-based communism represents the true negation of the scholastic activity of the philosophers. It is thus, for ultimately political reasons that Marx came to reject all philosophy.

## 5.2 The rupture with Feuerbach's materialist philosophical humanism

Marx broke with this entire framework in the *Theses*, a rupture probably induced by the publication of Max Stirner's *The Ego and His Own*, a book that appeared in between the completion of *The Holy Family* in November 1844 and the composition of the *Theses* probably sometime in the spring of the following year.<sup>1</sup> The criticism of Stirner's book was largely directed at Feuerbach's conception of "Man" and the human essence. Applying Feuerbach's own transformative method of critique to Feuerbach himself, Stirner argued that Feuerbach's Man was yet another alienated abstraction. The latter, as we know, translated the terms of Hegel's Absolute into the true subject, man, showing that man's own quality or capacity of reason had been erroneously hypostatized in an unreal speculative being. Stirner went further and contended that Feuerbach's human subject, "man" or "species-being", was not qualitatively different from the conceptual abstractions of theology and speculative philosophy, since the properties or predicates of unique, human individuals had simply been fallaciously transposed onto "man" or mankind as a collective essence. Neither the Absolute nor Feuerbach's notion of man and the human essence were therefore real beings, the latter constituting another hypostatized and illusory abstraction from concrete, particular, and unique individuals, i.e. the individual ego, or the "I".<sup>2</sup> Above all, Stirner, whose radical opposition to the authoritarian and oppressive institutions of mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Prussia inspired later variants of individualist and libertarian anarchism, was philosophically an extreme nominalist who rejected all non-particular, abstract conceptual universals as oppressive "spooks" or illusions that served as instruments of domination over unique individuals, thus anticipating certain

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<sup>1</sup> Though officially dated 1845, the copies of the first edition of Stirner's book were distributed in November 1844, just as Marx and Engels were finishing up *The Holy Family*. Concerning the *Theses*, there is no firm evidence indicating precisely when they were written. As already noted, they were only discovered by Engels in the 1880's and published as an appendix to his book on Feuerbach in 1888. When they were later republished in the 1920's and 30's, the Russian editors of the collected works of Marx and Engels proposed March 1845 as the probable date of their composition. Thomson suggests that the *Theses* may have been written as early as December 1844 (Thomson 2004, 142, 152). Regardless of the precise date of their composition, what is crucial is that they were written sometime in between *The Holy Family* and *The German Ideology*.

<sup>2</sup> See primarily Part 1, entitled "Man" (Stirner 1963). For commentary Cf. Thomson 2004, 113-19, 134-5, Hook 1962, 165-73, Callinicos 1985, 43.



themes in Nietzsche and, more recently, postmodernism.<sup>3</sup> Such abstract concepts and metaphysical generalities were not confined to the philosophical humanism of the Hegelian left, but included all of the popular shibboleths of the day - God, the people, mankind, the nation, revolution, the state, freedom, the rights of man, etc.

In any case, Stirner's scathing critique may have led Marx to an awareness of the limited and abstract character of Feuerbach's materialist humanism. More specifically, Marx begins to recognize that the conception of human nature in terms of labor and productive life activity that he had adumbrated in the 1844 Manuscripts is fundamentally inconsistent with Feuerbach's notion of species-being, as well as his materialist conception of the relationship between human beings and nature, and in the *Theses*, Marx starts to draw out the consequences and implications of this fissure, albeit in language which is still heavily indebted to Feuerbach, Hegel, and the broader tradition of German classical idealism.

#### 5.2.1 Sensuous human practice: praxis as human labor

This becomes apparent in the opening statement of the *Theses*: 'The chief defect of all previous materialism (that of Feuerbach included) is that the Object [*der Gegenstand*], actuality, sensuousness [*Sinnlichkeit*], are conceived only in the form of the object [*des Objekts*], or of contemplation [*Anschauung*], but not as *sensuous human activity, practice* [*Praxis*], not subjectively'.<sup>4</sup> Here, Marx is, among other things, attempting both to identify and contest what he perceives to be a fundamental defect in the way in which the concept of sensuousness or sensibility (*Sinnlichkeit*) has been traditionally conceived, as he likewise does in the fifth thesis, in which he specifically targets Feuerbach: 'Feuerbach, not satisfied with *abstract thinking*, wants *sensuous contemplation* [*Anschauung*]; but he does not conceive sensuousness as *practical*, human-sensuous activity [*menschliche sinnlich Tätigkeit*]'.<sup>5</sup> This contention reappears again in the ninth thesis, in which Marx castigates 'contemplative [*anschauende*] materialism . . . which does not comprehend sensuousness as practical activity'.<sup>6</sup> The German term *Sinnlichkeit* has its proximate origin in Kant. Bridging the gap between the Rationalists and Empiricists, he maintained in the *Critique of Pure Reason* that knowledge arises from an interaction between the two fundamental cognitive faculties of "sensibility" or sensuousness (*Sinnlichkeit*) and the "understanding"

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<sup>3</sup> Balibar 1995, 34.

<sup>4</sup> CW: 5: 3.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 4.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 5.

(*Verstand*). The former denoted the purely passive, receptive faculty of the human mind to register sense perceptions or intuitions. The mental capacity of sensibility or intuition is non-conceptual and immediate, being directly acted upon, determined, and affected by objects without any active, conceptual mediation. Consequently, sensibility yields access to particular objects as “given” (*Anschauungen*), in the sense that the relation of sensibility to singular objects is direct and immediate. The faculty of intuition furnishes the raw material or components on which the active, mediating, and synthetic faculty of the human understanding works to produce general or universal concepts and representations. For Hegel too, sensibility or “sensible consciousness” referred to a mode of apprehension of objects as given, direct, and unmediated.<sup>7</sup>

It is this understanding of the concept of sensuousness, signifying the purely passive and receptive faculty through which humans relate to the sensible world of objects, a conception characteristic of Feuerbach (and indeed, the whole 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century British and French empiricist and materialist traditions that had played the key role in developing the basic idea), with which Marx disagrees. The failure to comprehend sensuousness in active terms as praxis is inextricably linked with an inadequate grasp of the object or objectivity. The notion of *Sinnlichkeit* as a passive and receptive faculty yielded a conception of the object or objectivity (*Gegenstand*) as mere object (*Objekt*), i.e. contemplation or intuition (*Anschauung*). In the previously cited opening line of the *Theses*, Marx evidently contrasted an understanding of object or objectivity in the sense of *Gegenstand* with that of the object as mere *Objekt* or *Anschauung*. This latter term has no direct counterpart in English, but is commonly translated as “intuition” or “contemplation”. Wal Suchting has chosen to render it as “given”, in the original Latin sense of “data”, i.e. something given or that which is given. In Kant, the receptive capacity of sensibility (*Sinnlichkeit*) yielded objects as *Anschauungen*, in the sense that particular objects are registered by the former, immediately, directly and without any active mediation.<sup>8</sup> The contrast between *Gegenstand* and *Objekt*, as Suchting demonstrates, has its proximate roots in Hegel, in particular in the “Doctrine of the Notion”, the last of the three major divisions of his *Logic*.<sup>9</sup> From the “Subjective Notion” of reality, in which the latter is conceived in terms of the constitutive determinations of subjective thought in abstraction from an object of thought, there is a transition to the converse notion of reality as objects (*Objekte*), in which the world is purely objective, i.e. comprised of objects constituted without reference to a subject. Both views turn out to be limited, one-sided, and abstract, being supplanted by a synthesis of the opposed viewpoints: reality is now apprehended as thinking which necessarily has an object, such that the object is *for* a subject. What was previously grasped as mere *Objekte*, i.e. reality understood in purely

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<sup>7</sup> Suchting 1986, 4-5.

<sup>8</sup> Suchting 1986, 4-5.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 2-3.

objective terms as objects constituted in themselves in complete independence from a subject, is now grasped as *Gegenstand*, that is, an objective reality that confronts, faces, or “stands against” a subject.<sup>10</sup>

Hence, Marx would appear to be suggesting that reality or actuality (*Wirklichkeit*) be grasped in relational terms, as a world of objects “standing against” or in relation to something else (a subject), so that objectivity is grasped as objects *for* a subject, rather than being simply “given” or constituted in itself in complete abstraction or isolation from a subject that confronts it. In other words, the conception of objectivity as pure objects (*Objekts*), or as something simply “given” in intuition or contemplation (*Anschauung*), is an inadequate one that can be rectified by understanding them from the alternative standpoint of sensuousness as sensuous human activity or practice. Or, put differently, had the prior materialist philosophical tradition been able to grasp sensuousness as *Praxis*, they would have been able to arrive at an adequate understanding of reality, actuality, and objectivity as *Gegenstand*, that is a world of objects standing in relation to a subject, and therefore, as comprehensible with reference to a subjectivity or subjective faculty confronting it, i.e. human sensuous activity, practice. Such appears to be the underlying or implicit meaning of Marx’s opening claim: ‘The chief defect of all previous materialism (that of Feuerbach included) is that the Object [*der Gegenstand*], actuality [*Wirklichkeit*], sensuousness [*Sinnlichkeit*], are conceived only in the form of the *object* [*des Objekts*], or of contemplation [*Anschauung*], but not as *sensuous human activity, practice* [*sinnlich menschliche Tätigkeit, Praxis*], not subjectively’.<sup>11</sup>

In the immediately following sentence, Marx adds, “Hence, in contradistinction to materialism, the *active* side was set forth abstractly by idealism — which, of course, does not know real, sensuous activity as such’.<sup>12</sup> This recalls the implicit tension present in the *Manuscripts* in which, because of the lack of any conception of humans as *actively* related to the world in Feuerbach’s naturalist materialist humanism, Marx was compelled to seek in Hegel’s speculative idealism, the conceptual coordinates of an understanding of humans in terms of their active and dynamic historical development through labor. The difference is that now Marx explicitly recognizes this. The prior materialist philosophical tradition had posited the real existence of natural sensible reality, and Feuerbach in particular, had highlighted the character of humans as objective, sensuous beings existing in an essential relation to nature on the basis of fundamental needs. But he failed to move any further; he failed to consider, on the basis of this basic fact, the ways in which humans, through their labor, actively shape and transform the natural world in order to satisfy their various needs, and in the process, simultaneously transform themselves. On the other hand, it

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<sup>10</sup> Etymologically, “*Gegenstand*” has the sense of “standing against” something else.

<sup>11</sup> CW: 5: 3.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

was Hegel who had grasped ‘the self-creation of man as a process’, of man ‘as the outcome of man’s *own labor*’, in short, the ‘*real, active* orientation of man to himself’, albeit speculatively.

Marx transcends the binary opposition between philosophical materialism and idealism, including the limits of both positions, through the category of human sensuous activity or practice, i.e. sensuousness grasped as *Tätigkeit* or *Praxis*. If traditional materialism posited the real, objective existence of the sensible world, this conception could not accommodate a principle of activity which would have conferred upon it a dynamic, historical dimension. Conversely, if the idealist tradition had developed a concept of the dynamic, constitutive activity of a subject, this was accomplished in abstraction from real sensible reality. In short, what was underscored by the one was ignored by the other and vice versa. Undoubtedly, Feuerbach’s own thought remained ensnared within this conceptual chasm, embodied in his bifurcated schema of the “heart” and the “head”, French materialism and German idealism, and Marx seems to be implicitly targeting this view in the second half of the first thesis:

Feuerbach wants sensuous objects [*Objekte*], really distinct from conceptual objects, but he does not conceive human activity itself as *objective* [*gegenständliche*] activity. In *Das Wesen des Christenthums*, he therefore regards the theoretical attitude as the only genuinely human attitude, while practice is conceived and defined only in its dirty-Jewish form of appearance.<sup>13</sup>

Marx is criticizing Feuerbach’s dichotomous opposition between theoretical or conceptual objects, i.e. the self-referential purely theoretical, which is truly active since it has itself as its own object, and sensuous objects, i.e. the passivity of sensuousness which has its essential object as an “other” that determines it, in other words, Feuerbach’s schema of the purely theoretical and spiritual activity of the German “head”, and the merely passive, egoistic, practice embodied in Judaism, which is egoistic and passive practice because it is determined by external needs. Lacking the notion of active and objective sensuous human practice, Feuerbach, who was left with a merely passive and egoistic notion of sensuous “practice”, was compelled to seek in “the theoretical attitude” the source of genuine activity. With the concept of praxis, understood as active sensuous human labor, Marx now definitively overcomes Feuerbach’s opposition between the passivity of sensuousness and materialism and the activity of thought and the understanding. There is no longer a merely passive sensibility, i.e. a sensitive, needy, receptive, and contemplative “heart” which is passively determined by a being or object outside itself, or which has its essential object as the “other” which defines it. Nor is there an active “head”, or purely theoretical activity which is active because self-referential. Rather, the category of labor, of sensuous human activity transcends this dichotomy, sensuousness or sensibility being active and objective, hence, not passive, and which is thus,

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<sup>13</sup> CW: 5: 3.

not purely theoretical. In short, neither the passivity of sensuousness, nor the abstract activity of pure thought, but active, sensuous human practice, which is both objective and subjective.

Marx's fusion or synthesis of the materialist tradition's stress on sensuousness or sensibility (*Sinnlichkeit*), on the one hand, and the idealist tradition's stress on activity or practice (*Tätigkeit, Praxis*), on the other, thereby generating the fundamentally new concept of human sensuous activity or practice (*sinnlich Tätigkeit, Praxis*), overcomes the traditional philosophical opposition between materialism and idealism in another sense, namely, by moving beyond purely objective and subjective conceptions of reality, respectively. On one hand, the category of sensuous practice or activity implies that reality or objectivity is no longer comprehensible in the purely objective terms of the materialist tradition as *Objekts* or *Anschauung*, that is, as given and constituted in itself without reference to the constitutive activity of a subject that confronts it. The traditional conception of sensibility only yielded the object as given in itself directly and immediately because the former was comprehended as purely passive and receptive, i.e. as immediate or mechanical effect and response to the mode of affection performed by objects. However, Marx's alternative understanding of sensibility in active terms as practice necessitates a corresponding mutation in the conception of objectivity itself, as constituted within the framework of its necessary relation to the activity of a subject confronting it, or in other words, as subjected to a relation of active mediation. Nor, on the other hand, is reality conceivable as that which bears the inner articulations of thought, or as something that can be assimilated, digested, or collapsed into the thought or mental activity of a subjective spirit, as in the idealist philosophical tradition.

Marx contended, on the contrary, that 'objectivity, reality, sensuousness' must be understood 'as sensuous human activity, practice', which means that objectivity must be grasped subjectively. This human sensuous activity or praxis, although subjective (a subjective faculty), is itself also 'objective [gegenständliche] activity',<sup>14</sup> i.e. it has its relation to objectivity qua *Gegenstand*. In this conception, it is sensuous human activity or praxis, more specifically human labor, which furnishes the basic framework within which nature or sensuous reality and human beings themselves are mutually and correlatively constituted.<sup>15</sup>

The relationship of human beings to the world around them is a primarily active one centered on concrete, sensuous human labor. Within this prism, the object of labor, that is, the real sensible world, is transformed in accordance with conscious human aims, while on the other hand, the subject of labor, the acting or performing agent (the laborer), simultaneously transforms himself as he develops and acquires

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Callinicos 1985, 38-9.

new needs, qualities, and capacities corresponding to the new sorts of objects brought forth. This enables one to grasp Marx's perspective that objectivity, reality, sensuousness, must be conceived as praxis, i.e. subjectively, while this praxis is at the same time objective, "gegenständlich" activity, hence, objectivity or reality grasped in a relation of active mediation to a subject (the laborer) confronting it. This conception is succinctly encapsulated in the third thesis, in which Marx wrote that 'The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-change [*Selbstveränderung*] can be conceived and rationally understood only as . . . *practice*'.<sup>16</sup> As Callinicos puts it, 'The labor-process . . . provides the framework of man's interaction with his environment . . . The relationship between man and nature is a dynamic one involving the transformation of both terms of the relation.'<sup>17</sup>

### 5.2.2 The ensemble of the social relations

Marx now grasps this implication of his understanding of human beings in terms of labor, and therefore, criticizes Feuerbach's abstract, ahistorical conception of the human essence, a conception which is itself, a direct product of Feuerbach's failure to grasp sensuousness actively as human labor. The latter's naturalistic humanism simply highlighted the basic fact that humans are sensuous beings with natural needs. Failing to consider the historically variable ways in which human beings actively labor and produce to meet their needs, he thus failed to provide any account of human nature in its necessary historical and social dynamic. His conception of the human essence, or species-being, is consequently a fixed abstraction, that is, an account of human nature *as such*, i.e. as it is given objectively in their natural sensuous needs and dependencies and subjectively in their consciousness as feeling, willing, and thinking beings. Thus, in stark contrast to his earlier formulations in *The Holy Family* and the *Manuscripts*, Marx contends in the famous sixth thesis,

Feuerbach resolves the essence of religion into the essence of man [*menschliche Wesen*]. But the essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality [*Wirklichkeit*] it is the ensemble of the social relations [*das Ensemble der gesellschaftlichen Verhältnisse*].

Feuerbach, who does not enter upon a criticism of this real essence, is hence obliged:

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<sup>16</sup> CW: 5: 4.

<sup>17</sup> Callinicos 1985, 38-9.

1. To abstract from the historical process and to define the religious sentiment regarded by itself, and to presuppose an abstract - isolated - human individual.
2. The essence therefore can by him only be regarded as “species”, as an inner “dumb” generality which unites the many individuals only in a *natural* way.<sup>18</sup>

Feuerbach’s understanding of religion is abstract, ahistorical, and asocial, as a result of his abstract, ahistorical, and asocial conception of the human essence, or human nature, the latter being conceived as that which is inherent in individuals as such, i.e. in abstraction from historically determinate social formations. Consequently, he only considered the essential nature of human beings in the general terms of what distinguishes them as a “species”, in other words, what defines or unites them in purely natural terms, in terms of certain common natural characteristics. Thus, Marx continues in the seventh thesis, ‘Feuerbach consequently does not see that the “religious sentiment” is itself a *social product*, and that the abstract individual which he analyzes belongs in reality to a particular form of society’.<sup>19</sup>

We might think of Marx’s positive alternative as representing, not a rejection, but rather, a displacement of the age old philosophical question concerning the human essence or human nature, insofar as he reformulates the question in *relational* terms, thereby moving beyond, or cutting across, the basic standpoints between which philosophers have generally been divided.<sup>20</sup> That is, Marx signals his repudiation of the various essentialist or “holist” positions according to which some general idea or abstract concept of a universal essence, or “genus”, precedes and determines the nature or essence of individuals, such that the content of the former is definitive of, and inherent in, the latter, as well as “nominalist” viewpoints that conceive individuals as primary and from which general, universal notions of the human essence are derived. As Balibar argues, ‘neither of these two positions is capable of thinking precisely what is essential in human existence: the multiple and active *relations* which individuals establish with each other . . . and the fact that it is these relations which define what they have in common’, hence, ‘Not what is ideally “in” each individual (as a form or a substance), or what would serve, from outside, to classify that individual, but what exists *between individuals* by dint of their multiple interactions’.<sup>21</sup>

There is a tacit recognition on Marx’s part of the force of Stirner’s critique of Feuerbach’s conception of the essence of “man” as a generalized, universal abstraction from the real existence of human individuals, such that “the essence of man” is a generic ‘abstraction inherent in each single

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<sup>18</sup> CW: 5: 4.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 5.

<sup>20</sup> See Balibar 1995, 29-30.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 29-30, 32.

individual'. But neither does Marx resort to Stirner's own nominalist position of the primacy of "unique" individuals, and the attempt to define individuals in isolation from one another. Instead, Marx's notion of "the ensemble of the social relations" as the multiplicity (network or "ensemble") of active relations established between individuals poses the question of the nexus between human individuals and the collective whole or totality, in particular society, in a new way.<sup>22</sup> More specifically, it is not the particular individuals that are constitutive of society as a whole, nor is society as a collective whole or totality constitutive of the individuals which comprise it. There is, rather, a reciprocity between the two poles embedded in the view, expressed in the eighth thesis, according to which 'All social life is essentially *practical*'.<sup>23</sup> The active, practical life of individuals is always necessarily situated within determinate social relations, or put differently, the individual who is active is so only within specific social conditions or circumstances already found in existence, and which constitute the life of the individual as necessarily a social one. At the same time, the practical life activity of individuals reproduces, shapes, and transforms the broader ensemble or network of social relations in which individuals live and are active. In other words, if humans are products of social conditions and circumstances already found in existence, being conditioned by the latter, it is also the case that the human beings themselves, through their various practices, simultaneously alter the social circumstances in which they find themselves. Thus, Marx wrote in the third thesis, 'The materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing, and that, therefore, changed men are products of changed circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that it is men who change circumstances and that the educator must himself be educated'.<sup>24</sup>

In short, any radical distinction between human beings and their environment, both natural and social, in which the former passively faces or confronts the latter as a given, or pre-constituted, set of conditions, is uprooted by an alternative conception according to which humans are already always in an active, dynamic, and practical relation to the world around them, and in which both material and social conditions, and human beings themselves are simultaneously and mutually undergoing continual processes of transformation. There is a coincidence or constant interchange between conditioning and conditioned, determined and determining factors within the framework of the practical life activities of human beings and the social relations established between them in order to carry out those practical activities. Hence, the understanding of human nature as defined by some "essence", as fixed and immutable, collapses in the face of the historical process of humans' active and practical self-transformation.

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<sup>22</sup> See Frosini 2001, 40-1.

<sup>23</sup> CW: 5: 5.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 4.



It is precisely due to Marx's conception of human beings as fundamentally laboring and producing beings that both accounts for and necessitates examination of the more historically variable human qualities and capacities which emerge and take shape in the social relations obtaining between individuals. The appeal to the ensemble of social relations designates the arena that must be investigated in order to understand what human nature is in the full sense.

### 5.2.3 Thought and knowledge as a social and practical relation

Marx's rupture with Feuerbach's naturalist humanism has implications for the status of human thought, and thus, of truth and knowledge. Consciousness necessarily emerges within the framework of our practical and active interactions with the material and social world, which is to say that human thinking, or all the products of human consciousness, is necessarily historical, finding its basis in the practical life activities of human beings, and the ensemble of social relations in which humans' laboring and producing activity is organized. This is the implicit corollary of his critique of Feuerbach; had the latter been able to conceive human beings in terms of their active and dynamic relation to the world on the basis of human sensuous praxis, and thus, to comprehend human nature in terms of the historically variable ensemble of social relations (the essential basis of which is practical), then he would not have committed the error of fixing religious consciousness, or the "religious sentiment" as an ahistorical abstraction, but instead, would have seen 'that the "religious sentiment" is itself a *social product*', because 'the abstract individual that he analyzes belongs in reality to a particular form of society'.<sup>25</sup> Put succinctly, human beings, and therefore their thinking, are historically constituted as a practical and social relation.

Marx would appear to be thinking along these lines in the well-known second thesis:

The question whether objective [*gegenständliche*] truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a *practical* question. Man must prove the truth, i.e., the reality [*Wirklichkeit*] and power, the this-worldliness [*Diesseitigkeit*] of his thinking, in practice [*Praxis*]. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking which is isolated from practice is a purely *scholastic* question.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> CW: 5: 4-5.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 3.

It has rarely been acknowledged that these famous claims in fact represent, first and foremost, a direct onslaught on Feuerbach, and not simply because Marx gave the title “ad Feuerbach” to these unpublished notes. Feuerbach himself had already explicitly advocated a philosophical conception whose status would be “*this-worldly*” as opposed to the “*other-worldly*” status of theology and speculative philosophy.<sup>27</sup> So for example, Feuerbach criticizes speculative philosophical idealism for turning ‘*the this-sidedness of the real world* into an over-beyond’.<sup>28</sup> We find, in other words, in Feuerbach, a whole contrast between a philosophy whose status and orientation would be “*this-worldly*”, i.e. the “this-sidedness” or “this-worldliness” [*Diesseitigkeit*] of human thinking, and whose implicit conceptual opposite with which it is counterposed is that of thought as “*other-worldly*”, i.e. the “otherworldliness” [*Jenseitigkeit*] of an abstract and speculative thought. His demand for the re-orientation or re-conceptualization of philosophy in its “this-worldliness” was, however, firmly embedded in his conception of objectivity, reality, actuality, and sensuousness as mere *Objekte* or *Anschauung*. That is, the *Diesseitigkeit* of human thinking was tantamount to that form of thinking which is bounded by the real, by ‘*matter* - the substratum of reality’ which provides the *stimulus* and the material for thought,<sup>29</sup> and which is none other than the real object ‘which is given in immediate sense perception’,<sup>30</sup> in contrast to speculative and other-worldly philosophizing that ‘*abstracts* from all that is immediately or sensuously given, or from all objects distinguished from thought’.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, the this-worldliness of thought rooted in sensuousness was directly linked by Feuerbach to the question of “objective truth”: ‘Only that thought which is *determined* and *rectified* by *sensuous perception* is *real objective* thought - the thought of *objective truth*’, as opposed to ‘that absolute thought, that is, thought which is isolated and cut off from sensuousness’.<sup>32</sup> Or, as he put it in another passage whose language again resembles Marx’s own in the second thesis, ‘Thought proves its truth by taking recourse to sensuousness’.<sup>33</sup> On this basis, Feuerbach argues that *man’s knowledge . . . follows things as their copy*’, in other words, it is ‘*a posteriori*, or *empirical knowledge*’, as opposed to ‘*a priori*, or speculative’ knowledge.<sup>34</sup> In short, the new philosophy will find its ‘absolutely *anti-scholastic*’ basis in ‘the principle of *sensualism*’, as opposed to the “scholasticism” of philosophical speculation.<sup>35</sup>

Indeed, Marx was quite right that ‘Feuerbach, not satisfied with *abstract thinking*, wants *sensuous contemplation* [*Anschauung*]; but he does not conceive sensuousness as *practical*, human-sensuous

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. Feuerbach 1972, 177.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 211.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 198, 217.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 182.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 191.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 237.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 223.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 188.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 164-5.

activity’.<sup>36</sup> For Feuerbach, ‘*reality, actuality, and objectivity*’ all designate that reality which is given directly and immediately through the senses or sense-perception, and which in turn provides the “stimulus”, content, and raw material for thought. Human thinking attains the status of truth and objectivity to the extent that, by being acted upon, ‘*determined and rectified by sensuous perception*’, thought accurately “copies”, “mirrors”, or “reflects” reality or objects as they are directly given in sensuousness. The tacit corollary of Marx’s contentions, understood in the context of his confrontation with Feuerbach that we have been examining, would seem to be that the nature of objective truth, and by implication, human knowledge, cannot adequately be grasped as a passive process of mirroring or reflection of a pre-given or pre-constituted reality of objects (*Objekte*) immediately given in sensuous intuition or contemplation (*Anschauung*).<sup>37</sup> And this is precisely because of Marx’s transformation of the traditional category of sensuousness into that of sensuous human activity or practice, i.e. *Sinnlichkeit* grasped as *Tätigkeit* or *Praxis*.

Thinking no longer finds its basis in sensuousness traditionally conceived, but instead, in our practical and active interactions with the world. Humans are already always practically “in” the world, and thus, the process through which humans come to understand and know the world in which they find themselves necessarily occurs within the framework of their practical life activities. Not long before he died, Marx reiterated this perspective from the *Theses*, writing that ‘the relations of people to nature are . . . *practical* from the outset, that is, relations established by action . . . rather than *theoretical* relations’.<sup>38</sup> And therefore, the world we come to know and understand is one which is not “given”, but one which both already has been and is being shaped by our laboring and producing activities. In other words, if our fundamental and primary relation to the world is a practical and active one, then it follows that we understand and know the world insofar as we practically relate to it and actively transform it, simultaneously transforming ourselves in the very same process.

Human thinking, “truth”, and the process of knowing are therefore, inseparable from the historical process itself. And since humans are necessarily active within a set of relations to others, human thought, truth, and knowledge are necessarily social, i.e. they are inseparable from a historically determinate ensemble of social relations, and thus, the network of practical activities which constitute its

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<sup>36</sup> CW: 5: 4.

<sup>37</sup> It is perhaps significant, in this context, that Marx, in the second thesis, establishes a clear opposition between objective truth, understood as a question of theory, on the one hand, and as a practical question on the other. For “theory” etymologically has the sense of a “viewing” or “contemplating”, i.e. the process of knowing conceived passively. Marx’s distaste for “theory” is then closely connected to his criticisms of objectivity, actuality or reality, and sensuousness as grasped in the form of mere *Anschauung* or “contemplation”, for the latter has the etymological sense of “looking”, “gazing”, or “observing”.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Suchting 1986, 15.

fundamental basis. This is perhaps, part of what Marx means when he says that ‘All social life is essentially *practical*. All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice’.<sup>39</sup> The this-worldliness (*Diesseitigkeit*) of human thinking and human truth, conceived in its effective reality (*Wirklichkeit*) and power (*Macht*), would seem to designate, at the very least, that specifically human mode of understanding and knowing which is bound up with the historical, social, and practical process of transforming and harnessing the world around us, and through which we ourselves develop new practical powers and capacities.

### 5.3 The double meaning of praxis

In the *Theses*, however, Marx did not only break with the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century British and French traditions of philosophical materialism, and the materialist humanism of Feuerbach that he had earlier espoused in *The Holy Family* (materialism in the “*theoretical* domain”). He also broke with materialism in the “*practical* domain”, i.e. the domain of politics, and thus, with the whole materialist theory of the omnipotence of external circumstances and the corresponding political conception he expounded in *The Holy Family*. This double rupture is connected to the fact that, in the *Theses*, the central category of *Praxis* has, in fact, a dual meaning and significance. On one hand, it is evident that Marx’s deployment of the concept of practice, in the previously expounded sense of “sensuous human activity, practice” (*sinnlich menschliche Tätigkeit, Praxis*), aimed at providing an account of the most basic, fundamental, and primary relationship of humankind to the world around them, both natural and social, and therefore was chiefly concerned to delineate the nature of this relation specifically at the level of human labor and productive life activity. It is clear that the *Theses* can and should be read, at least partially, within this analytic optic. On the other hand, it is equally true that they can and should also be read in terms of a more specifically *political* analytic optic. This is because Marx also speaks of practice as “revolutionary practice” [*revolutionäre Praxis*], and as “revolutionary”, “practical-critical” activity, the significance of which is unmistakably political, and which is concerned to delineate the nature of the relation between

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<sup>39</sup> CW: 5: 5.

humans and their material and social circumstances insofar as the latter are actively transformed by the former through revolutionary political practice.<sup>40</sup>

This double meaning of the concept lies at the root of an apparent ambiguity in the *Theses*, namely, that Marx makes no serious attempt to distinguish between the two meanings, and to clarify in which sense of *Praxis* he is speaking. He seems to slide casually in and out of both meanings. The first thesis is an obvious case in point, in which he seems to begin with praxis as labor - “sensuous human activity, practice”, and finishes the whole argument by concluding with praxis in the political sense of ““revolutionary”, of “practical-critical”, activity’.<sup>41</sup> The same is true of the second thesis; does he mean that humans come to know the world as part of the practical process of transforming it through labor and industry? Or is he suggesting that truth and knowledge be re-conceptualized in terms of politics, i.e. in terms of the effective power of revolutionary practical activity in transforming and revolutionizing the social world? Similarly, we have already seen that the third thesis can be interpreted in terms of the simultaneous transformation both of the world and human beings themselves within the framework of the labor process. And yet, as we will see, this thesis has, above all, an absolutely crucial political significance, and accordingly, Marx concludes with the category of “*revolutionary practice*”.<sup>42</sup> This same equivocation is present in the eighth thesis, in which it is not at all clear whether Marx believes that thinking should be directed at the comprehension of human historical, social, and practical development within the framework of labor and the production process, or whether he wants to indicate the need for theory to coherently and effectively elaborate the terrain of political struggle and practices.

#### 5.4 Revolutionäre praxis

It seems to me that much of the ambiguity lies, not only in Marx’s failure to distinguish between the two senses of practice, but also in the noticeable isomorphism, that is, the common conceptual structure or morphology between the two meanings of the category, whose effect is conducive to the seemingly unproblematic interchangeability between the two. This is most clearly demonstrated in the

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<sup>40</sup> Löwy interestingly suggests that Engels (see CW: 5: 7) replaced Marx’s expression “revolutionary practice” (*revolutionäre Praxis*) with “revolutionizing practice” (*umwälzende Praxis*) in order to capture both senses of practice as “revolution” and “labor”, Löwy 2005, 105.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. 3.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid 4.

third thesis in which, with the concept of “revolutionary practice”, Marx breaks out of the theoretical framework of French materialist communism:

The materialist doctrine concerning the changing of circumstances and upbringing forgets that circumstances are changed by men and that the educator must himself be educated. This doctrine must, therefore, divide society into two parts, one of which is superior to society. The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-change [*Selbstveränderung*] can be conceived and rationally understood only as *revolutionary practice* [*revolutionäre Praxis*].<sup>43</sup>

Marx no longer subscribes to the view he adopted in *The Holy Family*, according to which humans are mere products of social circumstances, and therefore, changed circumstances yield changed human beings. In opposition to this one-sided view, whose political implication is that the masses are passive products of external circumstances, the category of revolutionary praxis indicates the *simultaneous* transformation both of external circumstances and human beings themselves. As Löwy argues, the concept of revolutionary practice ‘is, at bottom, *the transcendence, the sublation (Aufhebung) of the antithesis between 18<sup>th</sup>-century materialism (changing of circumstances) and Young Hegelianism (changing consciousness)*’.<sup>44</sup> The third thesis indeed represents a significant breakthrough in Marx’s intellectual evolution. From the “Introduction”, in which Marx placed emphasis on the transformation of consciousness, of the revolution which began in the brain of the philosopher and the “lightning” of philosophical thought, Marx moved, in *The Holy Family*, to the opposite pole, stressing the transformation of objective material and social circumstances as the key to the revolutionary transformation of society, and therefore, of humans. Or again, as Löwy puts it, ‘In the “Introduction,” he takes the side of the “German head” and the changing of men by “the lightning of thought,” but, in *The Holy Family*, he is on the side of the “French heart” and the primacy of changing “circumstances”’.<sup>45</sup> Now, in the third thesis, Marx succeeds in synthesizing the two through the category of revolutionary praxis: ‘The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-change can be conceived and rationally understood only as *revolutionary practice*’. In the course of the political struggle to transform material and social conditions, the masses transforms themselves, acquire consciousness both of their objective circumstances and of themselves as revolutionary subjects, and consequently, become fit for founding a new social formation. Thus, the revolutionary practico-political transformation of “external” or “objective” social circumstances coincides with the self-transformation and self-development of the subjective agents of this practical, revolutionary struggle, i.e. the proletariat.

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<sup>43</sup> CW: 5: 4.

<sup>44</sup> Löwy 2005, 105.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. 100.

The concept of revolutionary praxis in the *Theses* is, indeed, ‘the *theoretical foundation*’ of the political theory of the revolutionary self-liberation of the proletariat, which Marx would go on to develop more fully and explicitly in *The German Ideology*.<sup>46</sup> It represents Marx’s theoretical solution both to his own prior thinking and to the strategic political debates of the 1840’s raging within the various socialist and communist tendencies. He transcends the materialist communist tendency stemming from Babeuf and Blanqui who, seeing people as mere products of social circumstances, were consequently compelled to entrust to a conspiratorial elite (somehow standing above or outside the effects of social influences and conditioning), the revolutionary task of transforming social circumstances: ‘this doctrine is bound to divide society into two parts, one of which is superior to society’. It represents also the transcendence of that other dominant political strand at the time, namely, the pacifist, utopian brands such as that of Cabet or Robert Owen<sup>47</sup> that emphasized educational persuasion and peaceful propaganda as the key to the transformation of people and their consciousness. Marx’s criticisms in the third thesis are equally applicable to both tendencies, since both assume that the masses are passive productions of material and social circumstances - hence their respective views concerning political strategy. In this sense, the old materialism was a ‘contemplative [*anschauende*] materialism’, merely confronting human individuals with a set of social circumstances (civil society) which they were powerless to transform.<sup>48</sup> In contrast, the standpoint of the new materialism is ‘human society or social humanity’,<sup>49</sup> i.e. the genuinely human society of the future, because it conceives the human masses in their transformative relationship to the social world, actively and consciously changing their circumstances. Hence, rather than comprehending the relation between people and social circumstances as a passive and contemplative one, for the new conception, ‘All social life is essentially *practical*. All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice’.<sup>50</sup>

In the concept of revolutionary practice is contained the synthesis or coincidence of theory and practice, thought and action: ‘Philosophers have hitherto only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point it to *change* it’.<sup>51</sup> It is clear, not only from Marx’s lifework, but also in the *Theses* themselves, that this claim is not meant as a rejection of theory or interpretation in favor of practical activity, understood as a mutually exclusive relationship. Marx explicitly understands “revolutionary” activity as “practical-critical” activity.<sup>52</sup> Accordingly, the social world, along with its ‘inner strife and intrinsic

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 106.

<sup>47</sup> This is the example added by Engels in his edited version of Marx’s *Theses*, CW: 5: 7.

<sup>48</sup> CW: 5: 5.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. 3.

contradictoriness', 'must itself be understood in its contradiction, and then, by the removal of the contradiction, revolutionized', in other words, 'annihilated theoretically and practically'.<sup>53</sup> And so theory, if it is to avoid falling back into sheer mysticism and scholasticism, must find its basis in human practice 'and in the comprehension of this practice'. Critical theoretical and interpretive activity occurs within the framework of the political struggle itself, since it is only through active participation in revolutionary political practice that the masses learn, educate themselves about the social conditions in which they find themselves, and develop a critical consciousness and awareness about the state of things and their corresponding practical tasks. In short, in *revolutionäre Praxis* there is an integral synthesis and coincidence between theory and practice, interpreting and changing, knowledge and action: 'Man must prove the truth, i.e. the reality and power, the this-sidedness [*Diesseitigkeit*] of his thinking, in practice'.

### 5.5 Praxis: a theoretical breakthrough at both levels of the concept

The above analysis of the concept of revolutionary practice serves to indicate the isomorphism between the two senses of *Praxis*, and which in turn helps explain why the *Theses* can be legitimately and successfully read in both meanings. It consists in praxis as "dialectical"<sup>54</sup> hinge or intermediary between "object" and "subject". Just as praxis, as labor, provides the dynamic framework within which the concrete world, both natural and social, and human beings themselves are mutually and correlatively constituted, so praxis, as revolutionary political practice, provides the dynamic framework within which the concrete environment, including material, social, and political circumstances and human beings themselves, including their thinking, are mutually and correlatively constituted. Human labor actively transforms and reshapes nature and society (object) and in the process, humans transform themselves and their consciousness as they develop new needs and capacities (subject), just as humans, in the political process of transforming and revolutionizing the social world (object), also transform themselves and their thinking about the world (subject). Callinicos suggests this structural link between the two concepts of *Praxis* when he writes that Marx's 'conception of revolutionary consciousness as arising from the interaction between the working class and their objective circumstances was undoubtedly connected to

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid. 4.

<sup>54</sup> A term which Marx himself does not use to depict this idea, but which has nevertheless been amply deployed by the various commentators in order to describe it.



Marx's analysis in the *Manuscripts* of the formation and constant transformation of human nature in the metabolism between man and nature'.<sup>55</sup>

Understood and expressed in terms of its classical, Aristotelian genealogy, one might, following Balibar, conceive Marx's theory of practice as a transcendence of the traditional distinction between "praxis" and "poiesis" in a new synthesis, i.e. of that free and voluntary action through which man transforms, realizes, and perfects himself (which Aristotle associated with ethical and political life), and that instrumental action directed at making, producing, and perfecting things, and which has reference to nature and the constraints of the material world.<sup>56</sup> Though one could perhaps add that, in synthesizing "praxis" and "poiesis", Marx also overcame the classical distinction between these two forms of human activity and "theoria", i.e. the other activity of the classical triad into which the basic activities of man were divided. Humans act upon and transform the concrete world in order to bring forth new objects, new forms and conditions of existence (poiesis), and in so doing, simultaneously transform and realize themselves (praxis). It is within the framework of this dynamic and correlative interaction that theory (theoria), i.e. truth, knowledge, and understanding, emerges and develops, so that theory loses its etymological sense of passive contemplation, and becomes fully integrated with human practical life, theory now understood as an eminently practical and active mode of knowing and coming to understand the world.

If Marx, in the *Theses*, sometimes seems to shift between the two senses of *Praxis* without explicitly distinguishing between them, it is because he has achieved a theoretical breakthrough at both analytical levels of the concept, and precisely because of this, he wrote these notes with both meanings in mind, a breakthrough which furthermore, is closely related to the common conceptual structure between the two meanings of *Praxis*. Just as the modern materialist philosophical tradition, and in particular Feuerbach's materialist humanism (materialism in the theoretical domain), had failed to conceive humans in their active relation to the material world through sensuous human practice, and therefore, failed to grasp humans' active, historical self-transformation, so the political correlates of the materialist philosophical tradition as embodied in English and French socialism and communism (materialism in the practical, political domain), failed to grasp humans in their active and transformative relation to material and social circumstances through revolutionary political practice, and therefore, failed to grasp the masses' self-transformation, self-development, and self-education as this takes place within the course of revolutionary, practical political struggle itself.

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<sup>55</sup> Callinicos 1985, 46.

<sup>56</sup> Balibar 1995, 40-1.

But by developing the concept of *Praxis* in the way he did, Marx not only broke with the modern materialist philosophical tradition and its political corollaries (his own former framework in *The Holy Family*), but also with the idealist speculative philosophical tradition, including its political corollaries. Marx's concept of sensuous human activity, practice [*sinnlich menschliche Tätigkeit, Praxis*] overcomes the opposition between the idealist philosophical tradition's stress on activity and practice as a speculative, mental action of thought, understanding, and the intellect, and which accounts for the subject's ideal constitution of reality and itself, and the materialist philosophical tradition's opposite stress on the "givenness" of the concrete, sensuous material world as constituted in itself without reference to the constitutive activity of a subject. Humans' concrete laboring and producing activities practically shape and transform the concrete, sensuous material world, and through which human subjects develop and transform themselves. What is crucial is not the pure objectivity of the materialist philosophical tradition or the pure subjectivity of the idealist philosophical tradition, but rather, the practical relation through which real, sensuous reality and real active human agents are mutually and correlatively constituted in a historical framework. Object and subject, reality and human beings, material and ideal are fused and synthesized within the framework of sensuous *Praxis*. Similarly, Marx's concept of revolutionary practice [*revolutionäre Praxis*] overcomes the idealist political implications of the speculative philosophical tradition, namely, the exclusive demand to transform consciousness, to think and interpret reality in another way, and thus to conceive practice at the practical, political level as mere theoretical and intellectual practice, as well as the political implications of the materialist philosophical tradition, whose stress on the primacy of real material and social circumstances, and human beings as passive products and effects of these circumstances, resulted in an elitist conception of socio-political transformation as driven by an "enlightened" or "educated" minority somehow detached from the effects of social conditioning, whether this assumed the form of a conspiratorial voluntarism of elite revolutionaries acting in place of the "brainwashed" masses, or an intellectual elite entrusted to spread "enlightenment" to and educate the masses from above. Instead, the transformation of thought and consciousness and real material and social circumstances, theoretical and practical activity, interpreting and changing, knowledge and action, are fused together in a total or integral human activity - revolutionary, "practical-critical", activity or practice, in which there is a 'coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-change'.

As a result, Marx no longer needs to repudiate the idealist speculative philosophical tradition by reverting to the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century British and French materialist philosophical tradition, and the materialist humanism of Feuerbach. Instead, philosophy, along with all the other forms of human consciousness, can now be explained as historically determinate products of human praxis and the

antagonistic and contradictory ensemble of social relations in which human labor and social praxis is organized. Analogously, Marx no longer needs to repudiate philosophy as a purely interpretive, intellectual and conceptual activity by reverting to the emphasis on real material conditions, and hence, the real practical struggles required to transform them. Instead, theoretical and interpretive activity is inseparable from the practical, political revolutionary struggle itself. In short, the category of *Praxis*, as developed in the *Theses*, represents a genuine *Aufhebung* of materialism and idealism, a simultaneous cancellation and preservation in which the one-sided limitations of both positions are superseded in a new synthesis that still preserves the insights of both.

## 5.6 History and ideology

*The German ideology*, written in the fall of 1845 through the summer 1846, represents, to a certain extent, the culmination of Marx's tortuous journey through philosophy that has thus far been traced. It therefore assumes the form of a veritable self-criticism, a work of self-clarification. Through an extended critique of the German left-Hegelians, Marx was also challenging his own prior philosophical views, with the aim of superseding them. As Marx later expressed,

When in the spring of 1845 he [Engels] too came to live in Brussels, we decided to set forth together our conception as opposed to the ideological one of German philosophy, in fact to settle accounts with our former philosophical conscience. The intention was carried out in the form of a critique of post-Hegelian philosophy . . . We abandoned the manuscript to the gnawing criticism of the mice all the more willingly since we had achieved our main purpose — self-clarification.<sup>57</sup>

Despite the unfinished state of the manuscript,<sup>58</sup> there is nevertheless a degree of coherence rooted in two chief factors, namely, the presentation of a historical conception organized around production, on the one hand, and on the other, the critique of ideology. These two elements are closely interlinked, and it will be necessary to grasp their mutual interconnection.

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<sup>57</sup> CW: 29: 264.

<sup>58</sup> *The German Ideology* does not constitute a "book" in the sense of a finished or definitive text, but rather, was editorially reconstructed from unfinished manuscripts. This is especially true of the first "Chapter" on Feuerbach. See Carver 2013.

### 5.7 The empirical scientific study of history versus the inverted ideological illusions of philosophy

The text opens with a general characterization of the ideological content common to the left-Hegelian representatives of modern German philosophy. Their ideas, as well as their criticisms are trapped ‘in the realm of pure thought’, of philosophy. More specifically, they regard ‘the world as dominated by ideas, ideas and concepts as the determining principles’. These misconceptions, from which the left-Hegelians were unable to escape, had their chief source in Hegel. The latter, ‘completed positive idealism’, turning ‘the whole material world into a world of ideas and the whole of history into a history of ideas’. Departing from Hegel, ‘All the German philosophical critics assert that the real world of men has hitherto been dominated and determined by ideas, images, concepts, and that the real world is a product of the world of ideas’. It follows that ‘the German philosophers’, have only to ‘protest against the domination of thoughts, ideas, and concepts which, according to their opinion, i.e., according to *Hegel's illusion*, have hitherto produced, determined and dominated the real world’, i.e. the ‘real life of men, their material world, their actual relations’.<sup>59</sup> Marx gave clear expression to this reproach in the following important passage:

Since the Young Hegelians consider conceptions, thoughts, ideas, in fact all the products of consciousness, to which they attribute an independent existence, as the real chains of men (just as the Old Hegelians declare them the true bonds of human society), it is evident that the Young Hegelians have to fight only against these illusions of consciousness. Since, according to their fantasy, the relations of men, all their doings, their fetters and their limitations are products of their consciousness, the Young Hegelians logically put to men the moral postulate of exchanging their present consciousness for human, critical or egoistic consciousness, and thus of removing their limitations. This demand to change consciousness amounts to a demand to interpret the existing world in a different way, i.e., to recognize it by means of a different interpretation.<sup>60</sup>

As in *The Holy Family*, there is, for Marx, a close nexus between the speculative metaphysics of German idealist philosophy<sup>61</sup> and a corresponding idealism in the domain of politics, i.e. the reduction of “the real world of men” to mere ideas and concepts, and a conception of human liberation parasitic on the mere transformation of consciousness and ideas, i.e. the demand to simply interpret the world differently. And we can see, in the above passage, who Marx had in mind when he averred, in the famous eleventh

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<sup>59</sup> CW: 5: 23-4, 28.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. 30.

<sup>61</sup> One can recall here Marx’s squib, at the beginning of *The German Ideology*, about ‘a valiant fellow’ who ‘had the idea that men were drowned in water only because they were possessed with the *idea of gravity*’, *ibid.* 24.

thesis, that ‘The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it’. His target was the whole left-Hegelian movement of philosophical criticism, from its initiator in Strauss to Bauer, Feuerbach, and Stirner, along with their respective conceptual abstractions, e.g. “substance”, “self-consciousness”, “species”, “the unique”, “man”.<sup>62</sup> There is, moreover, another important consequence of German philosophical idealism, namely, a corresponding idealism in the historical domain: ‘almost the whole ideology amounts either to a distorted conception of this history [“the history of men”] or to a complete abstraction from it’, whereas ‘Ideology is itself only one of the aspects of this history’.<sup>63</sup> History is transformed into a mere history of ideas, and philosophy is confused with history. Philosophy, as ideology, thus amounts either to a misrepresentation of history or even worse, a complete denial of the real historical process that has produced it.

In opposition to “German Ideology” and its idealist conception of history, Marx [and Engels] proceed to outline the premises of their own materialist understanding of history. As we might expect, the rejection of the idealist outlook in favor of a materialist one does not amount to a replacement of speculative philosophical idealism with the modern materialist philosophical tradition and the materialist humanism of Feuerbach. Rather, Marx’s “materialist” alternative presupposes the rupture that had just taken place a few months earlier in the *Theses*. That is, it presupposes Marx’s whole conception of human beings as fundamentally active, laboring and producing beings that he had essentially adumbrated in the *Manuscripts*, along with its broader consequences that he drew out in the *Theses*. Indeed, as Balibar suggests, ‘It is no exaggeration to say that, after the “ontology of *praxis*” heralded in the *Theses on Feuerbach*, *The German Ideology* sets out an “ontology of production”’.<sup>64</sup> From Marx’s delineation of the being or existence of human beings as essentially defined by “sensuous human activity, *praxis*”, and which constituted the basic framework within which nature and humans are mutually and correlatively transformed, he now proceeds to an elaboration of human life in terms of *production*, i.e. of the production of the material means of existence, conceived ‘in a general sense to refer to any human activity of formation and transformation of nature’, ‘an activity at once personal and collective (transindividual) which transforms him at the same time as it irreversibly transforms nature and which, in this way, constitutes “history”’.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid. 29-30.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. 28.

<sup>64</sup> Balibar 1995, 35.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

This materialist conception of history does not find its point of departure in any philosophical *concept* or idea of “matter”, or in any philosophical notion of a “substance”, or an “essence of man”.<sup>66</sup> Rather, it is a historical conception that bases itself on the real existence of human beings within nature, and its ‘modification in the course of history through the action of men’.<sup>67</sup> Human history is based on the changing ways, or various modes of production, through which they labor and produce to meet changing needs.<sup>68</sup> The basic relation of humans to nature is therefore necessarily historical from the outset. And it is also necessarily social, since human individuals must enter into definite relations with one another in order to carry out production.<sup>69</sup> The production of the material means of existence thus assumes particular forms through the course of historical development, i.e. it manifests itself in historically determinate modes of production [*Produktionweise*] and social forms of intercourse [*Verkehrsform*] corresponding to and determined by them.

Marx goes on to elaborate the historical development of different modes of production in terms of the development and expansion of humanity’s “productive forces” or “forces of production” [*Produktivkräfte*].<sup>70</sup> The development of the productive forces necessitates a particular form of division of labor,<sup>71</sup> which is, in turn, the basis for the emergence of various forms of property or ownership, in other words, the various relations between classes.<sup>72</sup> The various property relations, in turn, shape the broader institutions of society, including its political and state forms.<sup>73</sup>

*The German Ideology* thus presents an outline of the historical transformation of social formations rooted in the variable modes of production of the material means of life, the dynamic of which lies in the development of humanity’s productive forces, the emergence of new forms of division of labor and corresponding property and class relations, and thus, new forms of social intercourse (*Verkehr* or *Verkehrsform*). ‘The form of intercourse determined by the existing productive forces at all previous historical stages, and in its turn determining these, is *civil society* . . . the true focus and theatre of all history’. Human history centers on material production and exchange, industry, and commerce. Thus, it is

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<sup>66</sup> CW: 5: 105, 54.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. 31-2.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. 40-1.

<sup>70</sup> Marx translated the locution “productive powers”, used by Smith and Ricardo, into German as *Produktivkräfte*. See Therborn 1974, 274.

<sup>71</sup> CW: 5: 32.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. 86, 32.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. 32-6.

clear ‘how absurd is the conception of history held hitherto, which neglects the real relations and confines itself to spectacular historical events’.<sup>74</sup>

This conception of history closely resembles Marx’s reading at the time, his further studies of the classical political economists, and in particular, the Scottish Historical School’s elaboration of a “natural history of civil society” embodied in the so-called “Four Stages Theory”.<sup>75</sup> Marx acknowledges this debt, crediting ‘The French and the English,’ for having ‘made the first attempts to give the writing of history a materialistic basis by being the first to write histories of civil society, of commerce and industry’.<sup>76</sup> But Marx could not have arrived at such a “materialistic” understanding of human history were it not for the conceptual rupture achieved in his unpublished *Theses*, and in particular, the emergence of the concept of praxis as providing the elementary framework within which human beings exist in an active, historical relation to the material world, radically shaping and transforming the latter at the same time that they modify themselves, their social relations, and their thinking.

In opposition to the historical idealism of Feuerbach and the rest of the Young Hegelians, Marx proceeds to draw out a crucial implication of the contentions made in the *Theses*, namely, the understanding of consciousness as necessarily a material, historical, social, and practical relation. Human consciousness, and language itself as its medium of expression, are themselves historical and social products which emerged within the context of humans’ development through labor and material production.<sup>77</sup> The development of consciousness itself is interwoven with the historical development of human productive powers and capacities, of the mode of production of life and corresponding forms of social intercourse with one another.<sup>78</sup> As Marx contends,

The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men — the language of real life. Conceiving, thinking, the mental intercourse of men at this stage still appear as the direct efflux of their material behavior. The same applies to mental production as expressed in the language of the politics, laws, morality, religion, metaphysics, etc., of a people. Men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc., that is, real, active men, as they are conditioned by a definite development of their productive forces and of the intercourse corresponding to these, up to its

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<sup>74</sup> CW: 5: 50.

<sup>75</sup> See Ballestrem 1983, 5-7, and also Callinicos 2007, 23-4.

<sup>76</sup> CW: 5: 42.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. 44.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid. 44-5.

furthest forms. Consciousness [*das Bewusstsein*] can never be anything else than conscious being [*das bewusste Sein*], and the being of men is their actual life-process.<sup>79</sup>

This perspective enables Marx to provide an account of the origin and constitution of ideology. For it is only at a certain historical stage of material development of the productive forces, when the pressures of population growth and the expansion of needs induce the growth of productivity and thus, the further extension of the division of labor that the conditions arise for the detachment of theory from productive life, and therefore, the constitution of ideology. The historical conditions of emergence of the latter presuppose that the development of productivity has reached a point where a division between material and mental labor emerges.

From this moment onwards consciousness *can* really flatter itself that it is something other than consciousness of existing practice, that it *really* represents something without representing something real; from now on consciousness is in a position to emancipate itself from the world and to proceed to the formation of “pure” theory, theology, philosophy, morality, etc.<sup>80</sup>

Marx’s views from the *Theses*, according to which human life is understood in terms of praxis, and therefore that thought finds its basis in human praxis and the historical ensemble of social and class relations, which he now further develops in terms of the discourse of the mode of production of material life and corresponding forms of social intercourse, become the foundation of a supposedly scientific theory of history placed in diametric opposition to the speculative illusions of ideology, especially philosophy. Indeed, he claims,

In direct contrast to German philosophy which descends from heaven to earth, here it is a matter of ascending from earth to heaven. That is to say, not of setting out from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor from men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh; but setting out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process demonstrating the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process. The phantoms formed in the brains of men are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material life-process, which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises. Morality, religion, metaphysics, and all the rest of ideology as well as the forms of consciousness corresponding to these, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence. They have no history, no development; but men, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter,

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid. 36.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid. 45.



along with this their actual world, also their thinking and the products of their thinking. It is not consciousness that determines life, but life that determines consciousness. For the first manner of approach the starting-point is consciousness taken as the living individual; for the second manner of approach, which conforms to real life, it is the real living individuals themselves, and consciousness is considered solely as *their* consciousness.<sup>81</sup>

He concludes that ‘Where speculation ends, where real life starts, there consequently begins real, positive science, the expounding of the practical activity, of the practical process of development of men. Empty phrases about consciousness end, and real knowledge has to take their place. When reality is described, a self-sufficient philosophy loses its medium of existence’.<sup>82</sup> Therefore, ‘One has to “leave philosophy aside”, one has to leap out of it and devote oneself like an ordinary man to the study of actuality, for which there exists also an enormous amount of literary material, unknown, of course, to the philosophers . . . Philosophy and the study of the actual world have the same relation to one another as onanism and sexual love’.<sup>83</sup> As Callinicos writes, ‘These statements announced what the authors believed to be their final and irrevocable departure from speculation’s realm of shades for the firm ground of empirical science, whose premises are not the abstractions of philosophy, but “the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions of their life”, and “can thus be verified in a purely empirical way”’.<sup>84</sup>

There are a number of points that can be made about this dyadic opposition between science and ideology/philosophy. The first is that it is incomprehensible outside of the specific polemical context in which it is deployed. Its character, as Labica notes, ‘is essentially didactic and polemical. It is a response to the need, especially pressing in the German context, to put paid to speculative thinking by demonstrating its actual vacuousness at the expense of its empire-building pretensions’.<sup>85</sup> Marx’s repeated rhetoric about “real premises” that ‘can thus be verified in a purely empirical way’,<sup>86</sup> of the need for basic “empirical observation”,<sup>87</sup> the so-called “language of real life”,<sup>88</sup> and of “real, positive science”, or “real knowledge”,<sup>89</sup> is above all intended to radically differentiate his own position from the speculative fancies of the German philosophical idealists, who remain trapped in the realm of pure ideas and abstractions, and who therefore know nothing of the actual concrete social world. Such claims can hardly be said to

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid. 36-7.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid. 37.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid. 236.

<sup>84</sup> Callinicos 1985, 1.

<sup>85</sup> Labica 1980, 291.

<sup>86</sup> CW: 5: 31.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid. 35.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid. 36.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid. 37.

constitute an actual theory of science or scientific knowledge. Rather, they are best understood primarily as rhetorical and polemical devices, whose function was to render emphatic the speculative defects of German philosophy, and to propose in its stead, the need for the critical study of the actual social world. This is encapsulated in Marx's call for the need to devote oneself to the study of actuality, 'for which there exists also an enormous amount of literary material',<sup>90</sup> e.g. economic, historical, social, anthropological, etc., which the German philosophers completely ignore.

The second point is that Marx's decision to use the term "ideology" in order to capture and criticize the abstract and speculative character of German philosophy, and the polemical function it performs, is inextricably linked to the prior genealogy of the term, which had scarcely been developed at the time Marx was using it. Coined by Antoine Destutt de Tracy in 1796, the term signified the scientific study and analysis of ideas along the lines of the natural sciences. Developed within the framework of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century English and French materialist traditions of Locke, Condillac and Cabanis, Tracy's science of ideas or "ideology" aimed at demonstrating their origin and basis in sense-perceptions, thus combating metaphysics and religion and replacing them with a positive science. The term later acquired a pejorative sense during the reign of Napoleon, who used the term to attack his opponents, particularly Tracy and his school of followers, whose opposition to religion in the reform of the French national education system was at odds with Napoleon's need for an alliance with the Catholic Church. Napoleon denounced the ideologues for being abstract and speculative. The term "ideology" thus came to denote 'a sphere of abstract, disconnected ideas. With this pejorative meaning, the term passed into German before 1830 and was picked up in dictionaries by 1838'.<sup>91</sup> Marx's own usage of the term in *The German Ideology* combines elements both of the "first baptism" (as Rehmann calls it) of ideology by Tracy and his cohorts, and the second one by Napoleon; it refers to certain ideas in the critical, pejorative sense as abstract and speculative detachments, while at the same time, Marx, like Tracy, tries to analyze them in terms of their origin and conditions of emergence.<sup>92</sup> In any case, as Rehmann notes, 'from the nineteenth century onwards the term is usually employed to mark an opposition to an exact and scientific conception of the world'.<sup>93</sup> As Larrain argues, this dichotomous opposition between science and ideology has still deeper roots in Francis Bacon's theory of idols (which had strongly influenced French Enlightenment materialism), in which a firm distinction was established between various forms of false ideas or "idols",

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid. 236.

<sup>91</sup> Rehmann 2013, 15-20, Eagleton 1991, 64-70.

<sup>92</sup> With the difference, of course, that Marx locates their source in material production, the forms of intercourse, and the division of labor, in contrast to Tracy's attempt to ground ideas in sense-perceptions, Eagleton 1991, 77-8.

<sup>93</sup> Rehmann 2013, 15. Larrain also notes that 'During the nineteenth century the convergence between the term ideology and its negative content was completed', Larrain 1979, 28. Eagleton similarly notes that the sense of ideology taken up by Marx was that of a 'sphere of abstract, disconnected ideas', Eagleton 1991, 70.

including religion and metaphysics, and the rational scientific knowledge that was getting obscured by the former.<sup>94</sup> He sought to expunge the various idols in order to secure a solid foundation for a true science based on empirical methods of observation. Hence, the dichotomous opposition between scientific knowledge and distorted or mystifying forms of consciousness that are abstract and speculative, and that obstruct the former, a central feature of Marx's formulation of ideology, has identifiable historical and intellectual antecedents.

Finally, one can note that Marx's critique of philosophy and ideology continues the Feuerbachian critical schema of philosophy as a speculative, inverted distortion. The German Ideology, i.e. speculative philosophical idealism represents an inverted or distorted reflection of reality. By inverting or overturning it, one can arrive at "true" scientific knowledge of reality. In this case, the key difference between the two consists in the fact that, for Marx, this inverted consciousness is not simply a form of mental illusion or misrecognition that can be overcome through a correct consciousness, but rather, has concrete foundations in the material and social world.<sup>95</sup>

### **5.8 Ideology as class domination**

However, the problem with this emphasis on Marx's critique of ideology and philosophy in the negative register as primarily forms of speculative distortion, mystification, and illusion is that it tends to overlook or obfuscate the central problematic within which this critique is inscribed and to which the concept of ideology was developed as a response, namely, the problematic of domination. It might be the case that the way the text was editorially reconstructed has contributed to this type of reading. The text opens with the characterization of German philosophy as an ideological distortion, which is then immediately followed by Marx's sketch of his alternative materialist conception of history, the latter demonstrating the origin and constitution of ideology out of the mode of production, and the division between material and mental labor. It therefore seems that the concept of ideology is mainly an account of the detachment of social consciousness from the material base, i.e. of the formation of a speculative and illusory reality of pure thought, concepts, and ideas in abstraction from, and taking the place of, the real historical process that produced them. Through a critique of mystifying ideological representations, one

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid. 20-22.

<sup>95</sup> CW: 5: 36.

arrives at the real, scientific and empirically verifiable ground of history - material production. Viewed from this angle, ideology appears to be primarily ‘a theory of misrecognition or illusion, the converse of a theory of knowledge’.<sup>96</sup>

But Marx, as Balibar rightly posits, ‘does not produce a theory of the constitution of ideologies as discourses, as particular or general systems of representation and then merely *retrospectively* raise the question of domination: that question is always already included in the elaboration of the concept’.<sup>97</sup> The editorially reconstructed order of the text creates the appearance that the discussion of ruling class ideas and the so-called “dominant ideology” only occurs *after* Marx’s elaboration of a concept of ideology as illusion, distortion, and mystification. It might then seem that the essential part of Marx’s theory of ideology consists in its negative character as mere illusion, while its mode of functioning in networks of class domination is only an ancillary consideration, or mere appendage to its analysis from the standpoint of the former. On the contrary, if the emergence of the problematic of ideology is inextricably linked, from the outset, with that of the nature of domination, this is to be explained by the fact it represents essentially a response to issues posed by Stirner.<sup>98</sup>

The problematic of ideology, as Balibar correctly argues, emerges as a response to the question, posed by Stirner, of the connection between power and ideas, domination and conceptual abstractions. Working within the framework of German philosophical idealism, and its belief that the real world is dominated by ideas and concepts, that the former is a product of the latter, and therefore, that the German philosophers have only to protest against the rule and domination of ideas, thoughts, and concepts,<sup>99</sup> Stirner took these notions to their extremes, positing *all* general ideas and conceptual abstractions as forms of domination and oppression over unique individuals. Accordingly, ‘Saint Max shares the belief of all critical speculative philosophers of modern times that thoughts, which have become independent, objectified thoughts — ghosts — have ruled the world and continue to rule it’.<sup>100</sup> Marx discusses this view in detail in the section of his lengthy critique of Stirner entitled *Hierarchy*,<sup>101</sup> in which he interrogates the latter’s account of “fixed ideas” as the source of power and domination. *Hierarchy*, according to Stirner himself, is ‘the domination of thought’, ‘the supreme domination of spirit’, which is to say the ‘domination of the “holy”’, i.e. of ‘abstract thoughts’ over the real empirical world in history.

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<sup>96</sup> Balibar 1995, 43-4.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid. 45.

<sup>98</sup> *The German Ideology* is, in fact, primarily a response to Stirner. Thus, more than two-thirds of it is comprised of a detailed attack on his book, *The Ego and His Own*.

<sup>99</sup> CW: 5: 24.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid. 160.

<sup>101</sup> This is the title of a section from *The Ego and His Own*. See Stirner 1963, 67-96.

This, according to Marx, he portrays as ‘the domination of the holy ones, the ideologists, over the vulgar world’. ‘The outcome’ of ‘the domination which the “world of thoughts” exercises’ in history is bound to present itself ‘as the real, actually existing domination of the thinkers . . . in the final analysis, as the domination of the speculative philosophers’. Hence, ‘Saint Max has only to fight against thoughts and ideas of the ideologists and to overcome them’.<sup>102</sup> In believing thus, however, Stirner has simply produced a caricatured version of Hegel’s own account of the “domination of spirit” over the real world, the former merely adopting ‘Hegel’s world domination of the philosophers’, and ‘substituting the word “hierarchy” for “domination of spirit”’. For it was Hegel who had originally given expression to the idea that the “true domination of spirit” finds its perfect embodiment, on the foundations laid by the French Revolution, in the domination of philosophy, and therefore, ‘regards philosophers as the rulers of the world of the nineteenth century’.<sup>103</sup>

It was in this context, and in particular, the need to contest Stirner’s (and through him, also Hegel’s) notion of power and domination emanating out of ideas and conceptual abstractions themselves, in short, out of philosophy and the activity of philosophers and ideologists, that Marx developed his analysis of the “ruling ideas”.<sup>104</sup> In so doing, Marx formulates an understanding of ideology and philosophy as functional to a mechanism of power and domination that does not proceed from thought itself, but is instead, located in networks of class relations, hence, in real relations of economic, social, and political power. As Marx posits,

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class which is the ruling *material* force of society is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, consequently also controls the means of mental production, so that the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are on the whole subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relations, the dominant material relations grasped as ideas; hence of the relations which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance.<sup>105</sup>

Intellectual and ideological domination is a function of the real domination exercised by a class in the relations of private property, ownership, and control created by the division of labor. The class which has

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<sup>102</sup> CW: 5: 172-3.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid. 173-5.

<sup>104</sup> The section on “The Ruling Class and the Ruling Ideas” was originally part of Chapter III devoted to a critique of Stirner, and immediately followed the passages just quoted concerning Stirner’s and Hegel’s conception of the “domination of the spirit” and philosophy.

<sup>105</sup> CW: 5: 59.

effective control and ownership over the conditions of labor, the material means and instruments of production, and thus, the products of labor, also has control over “the means of mental production”, i.e. the apparatuses and institutions through which ideas are produced and transmitted, thereby enabling it to monitor and regulate the production of ideas within society, and subjecting the rest of society to their own ideas. It is worthwhile to recall that for Marx, the social division of labor is inseparable from private property, hence class relations, so much so that they are essentially identical expressions.<sup>106</sup> As Rehmann emphasizes, the division of labor ‘was not meant to describe a “horizontal” agreement about how to divide certain productive and reproductive activities, but rather a sharp “vertical” split in society that was linked to the formation of private property, classes, and the state’.<sup>107</sup> To speak of ideological control and domination as arising from the division of labor, more specifically that between material and mental labor, is to speak of its emergence and constitution within the framework of relations of class power and domination. ‘The exercise of domination’, as Labica puts it, ‘is a question simultaneously of *material production* and of *intellectual production* . . . economic power is also ideological power’.

Marx further adds, to this general claim concerning the indissoluble nexus between economic class domination and intellectual or ideological rule, that ‘The individuals composing the ruling class possess among other things consciousness, and therefore think’.<sup>108</sup> ‘What they “think”’, as Balibar succinctly puts it, ‘is, essentially, the form of universality’.<sup>109</sup> Marx argues that ‘each new class which puts itself in the place of one ruling before it is compelled, merely in order to carry through its aim, to present its interest as the common interest of all the members of society, that is, expressed in ideal form: it has to give its ideas the form of universality, and present them as the only rational, universally valid ones’.<sup>110</sup> This view is given clear expression, elsewhere in the manuscript, when he writes that,

in the relations that have existed hitherto, when one class always ruled, when the conditions of life of an individual always coincided with the conditions of life of a class, when, therefore, the practical task of each newly emerging class was bound to appear to each of its members as a *universal* task, and when each class could actually overthrow its predecessor only by liberating the individuals of *all* classes from certain chains which had hitherto fettered them — under these

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid. 32.

<sup>107</sup> Rehmann 2013, 30.

<sup>108</sup> CW: 5: 59.

<sup>109</sup> Balibar 1995, 45.

<sup>110</sup> CW: 5: 60.

circumstances it was essential that the task of the individual members of a class striving for domination should be described as a universal human task.<sup>111</sup>

Initially, Marx notes that the particular tasks, needs, and interests of a particular class struggling for dominance *do* coincide to some extent with the common or general interests of society as a whole, insofar as an ascendant class struggling for power cannot overthrow the pre-existing dominant class without the help of other classes, hence, without advancing the interests of other sections of society in the course of advancing their own. Thus, ‘The class making a revolution comes forward from the very start, if only because it is opposed to a *class*, not as a class but as the representative of the whole of society, as the whole mass of society confronting the one ruling class’. And it can do so because

initially its interest really is as yet mostly connected with the common interest of all other non-ruling classes, because under the pressure of hitherto existing conditions its interest has not yet been able to develop as the particular interest of a particular class. Its victory, therefore, benefits also many individuals of other classes which are not winning a dominant position, but only insofar as it now enables these individuals to raise themselves into the ruling class.<sup>112</sup>

The coincidence between the particular interests of a class rising to power and the common, more universal interests of the rest of society is however, only a transitory state of affairs. Every new revolutionary class striving for domination can only do so by mobilizing a broader array of social forces against the existing dominant class on the decline, and during this transient phase of revolutionary struggle, there is a genuine harmony of interests. But this just makes the maintenance of domination all the more difficult and untenable over the long run, after the revolutionary class has succeeded to power: ‘Every new class, therefore, achieves domination only on a broader basis than that of the class ruling previously; on the other hand the opposition of the non-ruling class to the new ruling class then develops all the more sharply and profoundly’.<sup>113</sup> There is, in the words, over the course of history, ‘an ever deepening contradiction between the particular interest of a class and the universality which serves as its disguise’.<sup>114</sup>

It is this conflict between the particular interests of a ruling class and the interests of the rest of society which necessitates that the particular interests of a dominant class be presented as the common

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid. 289-90.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid. 60-1. Marx instantiates this contention with the example of the French Revolution, in which the victory of the bourgeoisie over the aristocracy enabled numerous proletarians to become bourgeois.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Labica 1980, 293.

interests of the whole of society, which expressed in “ideal form”, i.e. at the intellectual and theoretical level of ideas, means giving them the “form of universality”, of presenting their ideas as the “only rational, universally valid ones”. As Labica contends, it is precisely ‘here that we discover the principle which underlies the *detachment* of ideology. This detachment is the explanation for the illusion and the inversion’ that characterize ideology.<sup>115</sup> There is no doubt that what we have here is a form of misrecognition. In an extreme form, it leads to the appearance that the conceptual ideals through which the particular interests of the ruling class are given a universal form and expression possess their own autonomy apart from the material conditions of class rule that constitute their real basis. The ideas of the ruling class are detached from the ruling class itself, with the consequence that they appear to have an independent existence. It then appears that the ideas themselves are dominant, ‘that during the time the aristocracy was dominant, the concepts honor, loyalty, etc., were dominant, during the dominance of the bourgeoisie the concepts of freedom, equality, etc.’<sup>116</sup> The fact that ‘The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relations, the dominant material relations grasped as ideas; hence of the relations which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance’ becomes obscured.<sup>117</sup> This is moreover, the basis and *point of departure* for the speculative mystifications of the historical idealism of German philosophy: ‘Once the ruling ideas have been separated from the ruling individuals and, above all, from the relations which result from a given stage of the mode of production’, and the conclusion is reached that history is always under the sway of ideas’, it becomes

very easy to abstract from these various ideas “the Idea”, the thought, etc., as the dominant force in history, and thus to consider all these separate ideas and concepts as “forms of self-determination” of the Concept developing in history. It follows then naturally, too, that all the relations of men can be derived from the concept of man, man as conceived, the essence of man, Man. This has been done by speculative philosophy. Hegel himself confesses at the end of the *Geschichtsphilosophie* that he “has considered the progress of *the concept* only” and has represented in history the “true *theodicy*”. Now one can go back again to the producers of “the concept”, to the theorists, ideologists and philosophers, and one comes then to the conclusion that the philosophers, the thinkers as such, have at all times been dominant in history: a conclusion, as we see, already expressed by Hegel.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid. 292.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid. 60.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid. 59.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid. 61-2.



This points to the thesis suggested earlier, namely, that Marx's concept of ideology is linked to the problematic of domination from the outset. The metaphors of illusion, inversion, mystification, etc. certainly succeed in *describing* and characterizing the features of ideology. But the actual, underlying *explanation* for the illusions of ideology lies in the network of class relations and class conflicts, hence, in relations of power and domination. The inversion of ideology is an *effect* of relations of class domination, a fact already vindicated by Marx's identification of priests as the first form of ideologists. As Rehmann writes, 'What *explains* the emergence of religion as an ideology out of the magic and natural mysticism of pre-state societies is not an "inverted consciousness", but rather the formation of a specialized priesthood that is set free from manual labor',<sup>119</sup> which is to say that ideology emerges at the historical point where relations of class domination emerge. The division between manual and intellectual labor is itself the product of class divisions, presupposing as it does the existence of a dominant, owning, and appropriating class or section of society freed from the toils of manual labor. Hence, the need for the dominant class to elaborate general concepts and ideas that smooth over the underlying conflicts of interest between it and the rest of society.

Over the broad arc of human history, Marx believes that the contradiction between reality and representation, the particular interests of ruling classes and the general interests of humanity as a whole widen, which accounts for 'the phenomenon that ever more abstract ideas hold sway, i.e., ideas which increasingly take on the form of universality'.<sup>120</sup> Marx's argument makes it clear that the growing detachment of ideology is not *simply* a function of the growth in the social division between material and mental labor, though this is certainly an important factor in the process of detachment: the autonimization of thought is rendered possible and produced by 'the real detachment of intellectual activities from social production'.<sup>121</sup> However, the need to give an "ideal form" to the economic rule of a class in the first place, along with the former's increasingly abstract and detached character is ultimately a function of the emergence of particular class interests, and their growing divorce from the interests of the rest of society. As this conflict between particular and universal interests grows over the course of history, it becomes all the more necessary to elaborate concepts at a greater level of abstraction, i.e. concepts that 'increasingly take on the form of universality'. And we can add that the form of universality given to the concepts and ideas of the ruling class becomes ever more precisely that - a mere ideal form or conceptual shell devoid of real content, in short, an increasingly vacuous and fictive universality utterly at variance with the particular interests of a dominant class that forms its real basis, and which it functions to conceal.

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<sup>119</sup> Rehmann 2013, 30.

<sup>120</sup> CW: 5: 60.

<sup>121</sup> Rehmann 2013, 30.

This schema of the growing detachment of ideology over the broad arc of human history also reproduces itself within the more compressed temporal frame of a particular historical epoch of the rule of a determinate class. Following the initial rise of a revolutionary class to power, in which, as we have seen, there is a genuine correspondence between their particular interests and the broader interests of society, the real conflict between the particular interests of the new ruling class and the subordinated, non-ruling classes emerges all the more sharply and profoundly. As Marx notes,<sup>122</sup> a community of interests, initially true, becomes illusory once the new ruling class secures power, thereby putting itself in a position to advance its particular class interests which, due to the pressures bound up with the period of their initial rise to and struggle for power were not able to be fully developed as such. Once in power, the “normal” day-to-day maintenance and reproduction of ruling class domination requires that the dominant material relations responsible for their rule be given an ideal expression, i.e. the material conditions accounting for their class rule must be justified and legitimated at the theoretical and intellectual level in the form of universality. ‘Insofar, therefore, as they rule as a class and determine the extent and compass of an historical epoch, it is self-evident that they do this in its whole range, hence among other things rule also as thinkers, as producers of ideas, and regulate the production and distribution of the ideas of their age: thus their ideas are the ruling ideas of the epoch’.<sup>123</sup> The required sublimation of particular ruling class interests in the ideal form of universality occurs through the work of ruling class thinkers and ideologists. The division between material and mental labor is reproduced within the ruling class itself, such that ‘inside this class one part appears as the thinkers of the class (its active, conceptive ideologists, who make the formation of the illusions of the class about itself their chief source of livelihood), while the others’ attitude to these ideas and illusions is more passive and receptive, because they are in reality the active members of this class and have less time to make up illusions and ideas about themselves’.<sup>124</sup> In “normal times”, when a class’ rule is relatively stable, there is even scope for a degree of opposition to develop between the active members of the ruling class and the ideas elaborated by its ideologists.<sup>125</sup> However, when the rule of a determinate class in a particular historical age begins to enter its twilight phase, that is, when a dominant class enters its period of decadence, their ideas, which were already only illusory forms of universality, become even more detached and speculative. In such a period of crisis and decline, in which the dominance of a class becomes seriously threatened, whatever cracks or fissures had previously existed within the ruling power bloc during its stable phase of rule, disintegrate. There is a realignment within the ruling class in crisis situations when their rule is on the precipice, but such a realignment, though necessary in order for the ruling class in decline to attempt to preserve itself, has the paradoxical

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<sup>122</sup> CW: 5: 60.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid. 59.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid. 59-60.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

effect of exposing the partiality of their class interests. In other words, the illusory character of its ideological claims to universality is exposed as such. As Marx argues, any cleavages internal to the ruling class vanish ‘whenever a practical collision occurs in which the class itself is endangered’, ‘in which case there also vanishes the appearance of the ruling ideas being not the ideas of the ruling class and having a power distinct from the power of this class’.<sup>126</sup> This exposure of the partial, fictive character of ruling class claims to universality in periods of crisis renders all the more necessary the ideological elaboration of concepts at ever greater levels of abstraction and detachment:

The more the normal form of intercourse of society, and with it the conditions of the ruling class, develop their contradiction to the advanced productive forces, and the greater the consequent discord within the ruling class itself as well as between it and the class ruled by it, the more fictitious, of course, becomes the consciousness which originally corresponded to this form of intercourse (i.e., it ceases to be the consciousness corresponding to this form of intercourse), and the more do the old traditional ideas of these relations of intercourse, in which actual private interests, etc., etc., are expressed as universal interests, descend to the level of mere idealizing phrases, conscious illusion, deliberate hypocrisy. But the more their falsity is exposed by life, and the less meaning they have for consciousness itself, the more resolutely are they asserted, the more hypocritical, moral and holy becomes the language of this normal society.<sup>127</sup>

Here, Marx produces a slightly different variant of the account he provided above. In this version, he suggests that a crisis in the rule of a dominant class does not lead to its internal realignment, but instead, has the converse effect of opening up and aggravating internal fractures. Nevertheless, the emergence of a crisis for a ruling class, whose underlying origin lies in the increasingly regressive effect that the conditions of rule of a dominant class has come to have on the development of the productive forces, means that the ruling class ideas become further detached, as their ideological claims to universality become increasingly hollow. This process involves a change within the thinking of the ruling class ideologists. If, during their initial rise to power, the ideological representatives of the ascendant class genuinely believed, with some reason, in their claims to represent the universal interests of humanity,<sup>128</sup> and if, following the establishment of their power in the post-revolutionary period, they continue (now erroneously) to believe thus,<sup>129</sup> the situation changes radically in times of crisis. In such a situation, the vacuity of their claims to universality becomes apparent even to the ruling class thinkers themselves, at

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid. 293.

<sup>128</sup> As Marx says, ‘the practical task of each newly emerging class was bound to appear to each of its members as a *universal* task’, *ibid.* 289-90.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid. 60.

which point their ideological activity becomes a deliberate and willed form of deception, and which is all the more relentless as the class they represent struggles to survive. In short, the breakdown of a particular historical epoch of the rule of a determinate class, and the crises this brings about, simultaneously involves a deterioration in the ideological appearances of universality, as the practical clashes between classes reveals them to be what they really are - cloaks for the particular interests of the ruling class now in decline, and yet more tenacious and desperate attempts on the part of the ruling class thinkers to reassert these ideological appearances in increasingly abstract and empty forms, i.e. in a purely formal universality devoid of any real content.

What specific role is occupied by philosophy and the activity of philosophers in this overall framework? The answer to this question is already implicit in what has hitherto been said. They operate at a “secondary” level, in the sense that they take over already existing ideological abstractions and render them even more abstract. As Labica puts it, philosophy ‘elaborates upon an already constituted ideology’.<sup>130</sup> Philosophers are, in other words, the ideologists *par excellence*. We might think of the “active, conceptive” ideologists of the ruling class, i.e. those who specialize in the art of translating the particular interests of a ruling class into the ideal form of universality, as referring in the first instance (at least in modern bourgeois society) to politicians and statesmen, lawyers and jurists of various kinds.<sup>131</sup> The particular interests of a ruling class assume a universal expression, in the first instance, in the institutional form or embodiment of the state.<sup>132</sup> In this way, the modern state represents an “illusory community”, a fictional universality through which, in reality, the ruling class asserts its common interests. The jurists, politicians (statesmen in general), moralists, etc., thus perform a pivotal function in elaborating and systematizing ruling class interests within the general framework or universal form of law, ethics, and politics. Here, the division of labor is crucial; people proceed from their respective crafts or professions, and regard it as the “true” one. ‘The judge, for example, applies the code, he therefore regards legislation as the real, active driving force’.<sup>133</sup> But in so doing, the lawyer, judge, or politician, is performing an important ideological function. Instead of seeing the state, law, and politics as a product of private property and determinate class interests, they “invert” the real relations, seeing the state, law, and politics as the basis of private property and the “driving force”. Consequently, the fact that state and law are but a veneer of common and general interests, of universality masking the determinate class interests

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<sup>130</sup> Labica 1980, 298.

<sup>131</sup> In pre-modern societies, Marx identifies religion as the dominant form of ideology: ‘To the “community” as it appears in the ancient state, in feudalism and in the absolute monarchy, to this bond correspond especially the religious conceptions’. Accordingly, he takes priests and religious clerics as the primary examples of ideologists, CW: 5: 92.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid. 90, 92, 329.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid. 92.

that provide their real content is obfuscated. Nevertheless, such ideologists within the ruling class still have some connection with the material world, conferring conceptual and theoretical form, within the moral, juridico-political framework to determinate relations of private property (even if they invert the real relations between the two).

Philosophy, on the other hand, takes as its point of departure, the ideological constructions already elaborated by the thinkers of the ruling class. This view is most emphatic when Marx draws the conclusions from his earlier critique of Stirner and Hegel from the *Hierarchy* section of the chapter on Stirner. Marx summarizes in three stages the ideological operation (“the whole trick” as he calls it) performed by philosophy in order to demonstrate the hegemony of spirit and ideas in history. Firstly, the philosophers detach the ideas of the ruling class from the actual ruling class thinkers who elaborated them, and thus, from the ruling class whose interests such ideas articulate. Consequently, they recognize only the dominance and rule of the ideas themselves, in complete isolation from the dominant class whose interests they serve. Secondly, “a mystical connection” is then established between “successive ruling ideas”, translating them into “forms of self-determination of the concept”. Thirdly, this self-determining concept or idea is personified in the form of “self-consciousness”, and on this basis is derived the notion that the “thinkers”, “philosophers”, and ideologists are the true rulers and manufactures of history. At this point, as Marx concludes, ‘the whole body of materialistic elements has been eliminated from history and now full rein can be given to the speculative steed’.<sup>134</sup> If the thinkers and ideologists within the ruling class are agents of ideological detachment insofar as they translate the particular interests of the ruling class into the ideal form of a general or common interest, thereby giving these interests a universal form, the philosophers go a step further in the direction of ideological abstraction by detaching the universal conceptual ideals already elaborated by the ruling class thinkers and making these ideas themselves the basis of rule and domination.<sup>135</sup> In this way, the link between ideas and the dominant class interests which constitute their real basis is utterly obscured. The fact that the antithesis between the particular interests of ruling classes and the general interests of humanity grows more acute, both over the broad course of history, and within individual historical epochs of the rule of a specific class, and therefore, the increasing necessity for ruling class thinkers to elaborate ideological constructions at increasing degrees of abstraction (increasingly assuming the form of a fictional and detached universality), only hastens the speculative fancies of the philosophers.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid. 62.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid. 60-2.

<sup>136</sup> Accordingly, Marx explains that the whole philosophical illusion regarding the rule of ideas themselves in history has its foundation in the growing need on the part of ruling class ideologists to give their ideas an increasingly

Marx continues that ‘this historical method which reigned in Germany’, i.e. the method characteristic of philosophy that regards ideas themselves, and thus, the thinkers and philosophers as the ruling forces in history, and which must be explained in its connection with ‘the illusion of ideologists in general, e.g., the illusions of the jurists, politicians (including the practical statesmen)’, ‘is explained perfectly easily from their practical position in life, their job, and the division of labor’.<sup>137</sup> The left-Hegelian philosophers give philosophic form to the conceptions of a backward German middle class, while the overgrowth of philosophy itself reflects the backward conditions of Germany.<sup>138</sup> More specifically, Marx argues that the speculative operations performed by the philosophers ‘is a consequence of division of labor, and that, in particular, German philosophy is a consequence of German petty-bourgeois conditions’,<sup>139</sup> a product of the real underdevelopment of Germany, and represents, in particular, the systematization of the limited world outlook of the German petty bourgeoisie. So, whereas ‘The French and English bourgeois complain about lack of markets, trade crises, panic on the stock exchange, the political situation prevailing at the moment, etc., the German petty bourgeois, whose active participation in the bourgeois movement has been merely an ideal one’, contents himself with the cause of the struggle of mere concepts and abstract ideas.<sup>140</sup> Labica pinpoints the significance of this link between philosophy and the petty bourgeoisie. ‘If the jurist or the statesman are, for their part, in the service of a class, if they are products of the division of labor within the dominant class’, the philosopher, by contrast, precisely because of his status as a petty-bourgeois, erroneously conceives himself as belonging to no class, as soaring above real history and the real class relations and class conflicts that constitute it. ‘His lofty practice soars above such empirical entanglements’.<sup>141</sup>

### **5.9 The practical power and efficacy of ideology beneath the rhetoric of illusion**

Viewed from the standpoint of the problematic of domination within which Marx’s critical analyses of ideology and philosophy are inscribed, there is a significant degree of convergence with

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abstract, universal form against the backdrop of the growing contradiction between particular and general interests, *ibid.* 60-1. Similarly, Marx contends that Stirner’s notion of the domination of ideas themselves is made all the more easier by the fact that, during ruling class crises, the ruling class thinkers elaborate increasingly fictional, illusory, and detached ideological forms of universality, *ibid.* 293.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.* 62.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.* 23.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.* 446-7.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.* 119.

<sup>141</sup> Labica 1980, 300.

Gramsci's own perspectives. Beneath Marx's repeated rhetorical emphasis on the status of ideology and philosophy as mere forms of illusion and mystification lies a much more complex, sophisticated, and in fact, original theoretical framework for understanding the nature and mode of functioning of ideological and philosophical conceptions. Ideologies are not mere chimeras or phantasmagorias. On the contrary, Marx's arguments point to the real historical and social efficacy of ideologies within the framework of ruling class power and domination. As I have attempted to illustrate, his theory of ideology is not simply or even primarily a theory of illusion or misrecognition, but rather, emerges as a theoretical account of domination from the outset. Marx did not respond to Stirner by rejecting the nexus between power and ideas or denying that ideas have practical effects. Of course, he utterly repudiated Stirner's notion that power, rule, and domination emanate out of the pure thoughts themselves. But Marx's alternative did not consist in asserting the converse thesis that ideas are ineffectual mirages, but instead, indicated the practical power and efficacy of thoughts and ideas in terms of their functionality to the rule of a dominant class, i.e. in terms of their specific positioning and mode of functioning within historical configurations of classes and the division of labor.

Intellectual and ideological domination is not at all an optional matter for a ruling class. On the contrary, economic rule *must* necessarily be simultaneously accompanied by ideological and intellectual rule. The former is no doubt the foundation of the latter, but without the latter the former becomes utterly unsustainable. Which is to say that in order to be dominant, a class must be able to translate their particular economic interests into the intellectual and ideological terrain, thus conferring upon them the ideal form of universality. As we have seen, this is true at every point in the historical trajectory of a particular ruling class, from its initial rise to power, the continued maintenance and reproduction of its class power following its initial establishment, and even more so when, facing a veritable cataclysm, a ruling class struggles desperately to avoid historical extinction. Analogously, over the broad course of human history, Marx's arguments suggest the increasing importance and centrality of various mechanisms of ideological and intellectual domination, as the antithesis between the particular interests of successive ruling classes and the broader interests of humanity grows more acute. In short, Marx's polemical rhetoric of illusion and distortion has the unfortunate effect of obscuring the central point of his whole analysis, namely, that of accounting for the *practical* role and *efficacy* of ideology within the framework of class domination, and therefore, of producing a realistic account of the nexus between power and ideas in the face of Stirner's speculative and idealist conception.

Moreover, this analysis of ideology presupposes the more fundamental theoretical framework of the *Theses*, in which human thought is construed as a historical, material, social, and practical relation, and more specifically, as a historically determinate product of the antagonistic and contradictory

ensemble of social and practical relations. The “earthly” or “secular” basis of thought in relations of social strife and struggle that Marx posited in the *Theses*, gave him a framework within which to further elaborate and analyze the nature of thought and consciousness in terms of historically determinate class relations in *The German Ideology*, and therefore, to pose the question of the nature of human thought in terms of ideology. One’s own “outlook on life” is a function of the given historical stage of development of the material productive forces, the division of labor, and social forms of intercourse, which means that it is a function of determinate class relations.<sup>142</sup> Peoples’ thinking about the world is overdetermined by their positions within the structure of class relations and the division of labor. Within this prism, Marx is able to repudiate Stirner’s (and Hegel’s) notion of power as deriving from thoughts and ideas themselves, by showing how the intellectual world, indeed the whole terrain of ideas and consciousness has real material, social, and historical roots in the class relations that characterize a given social formation, and thus, to rethink the nexus between power and ideas in terms of their mode of functioning inside these relations of class conflict and domination as ideological forms.

Hence, it is not only Marx’s tacit recognition of the importance and practical efficacy of the ideological terrain lying beneath the metaphorical rhetoric of “illusions”, which indicates a convergence between his and Gramsci’s thinking about ideology, but also the more fundamental, underlying conceptual framework in which their conceptions of ideology are embedded. For in highlighting the necessary class character or class constitution of consciousness, Marx’s account indeed implies the necessary *partiality* of all thought. The peculiar efficacy of ideology essentially lies in its capacity, in varying degrees, to give general, universal form to what are, in reality, particular class interests. The various forms of ideology, though they assume the ideal form of universality, have an essentially partial content, traversed as they are by particular class interests (as well as the particular interests deriving from the division of labor), thereby forming the basic mechanism through which ideas function in the service of particular class interests. There would appear to be no “outside”, no genuinely transcendent or impartial standpoint for thought, i.e. no ideas which are somehow above or autonomous from the structure of class relations and the social division of labor that constitute their real basis. Put succinctly, Marx’s account logically implies that there are no class-neutral, hence, genuinely universal ideas. Accordingly, the various forms of social consciousness that Marx identifies, e.g. religion, art, morality, law, politics,

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<sup>142</sup> Individuals always proceed “from themselves”, but an individual’s personal relations, within the framework of the division of labor have necessarily become “fixed” as class relations, CW: 5: 437-8. Or, as he put it, class ‘assumes an independent existence as against the individuals, so that the latter find their conditions of life predetermined, and have their position in life and hence their personal development assigned to them by their class, thus becoming subsumed under it. This is the same phenomenon as the subjection of the separate individuals to the division of labor . . . this subsuming of individuals under the class brings with it their subjection to all kinds of ideas’, *ibid.* 77.



philosophy, are all ideological, in other words, ideal, fictive forms of universality whose basic content is inescapably partial, being overdetermined by the particularity of determinate class interests.

### 5.10 A genuine displacement: philosophy as class power and domination

It is within the framework of this account of the constitution of the ideological forms within relations of class power and class conflict, that Marx *really does* bring about a fundamental shift or displacement of the traditional modes of understanding of philosophy. Just as Marx's critique of ideology in general was not a simple matter of counterposing pure illusions to the clear truths of empirical science, so his critique of philosophy was not a simple matter of rejecting it as sheer dream-like mysticism via the Feuerbachian model of inversion. For the first time in history, Marx posed the question of the nature of philosophy in terms of classes, that is, in terms of its specific position and mode of functioning within networks of class power and domination.<sup>143</sup> In so doing, Marx challenged the whole classical notion of philosophy as an autonomous, detached, and impartial form inquiry. He demonstrated not only that philosophical speculation was a product of specific historical, material, and social conditions, i.e. of the historical underdevelopment of Germany and the limitations of the petty-bourgeois class, but precisely because of this, that philosophy was actually the quintessential form of ideology, and the philosophers, the ideologists *par excellence*. Philosophy, in other words, is the supreme form of the ideological mechanism that Marx sketched. If the active, conceptive ideologists within the ruling class perform the initial work of detachment by constructing the appearance that the particular interests of the class they represent are representative of the common, universal interests of all, then philosophy 'specializes in refining the piece detached'.<sup>144</sup> Philosophy performs the function of further obfuscating and concealing the nexus between ideas and the relations of class power and domination underlying them, to the point that any trace of the latter is utterly lost, and the ideas themselves appear dominant.

It therefore plays a key role (whether consciously or unconsciously) in preserving the status quo, which is to say that it is particularly effective in its contribution to the continued maintenance and reproduction of a class' domination. It is precisely because of its speculative and abstract form, that philosophy functions efficaciously to preserve relations of class power. Marx seems to recognize this

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<sup>143</sup> Balibar 1995, 44.

<sup>144</sup> Labica 1980, 300.

implication of his critique of philosophy when he argues that despite their apparently “world-shattering” statements and criticisms, the Young Hegelians prove, in practice, to be ‘the staunchest conservatives’.<sup>145</sup> Stirner, as Marx contends, actually canonizes the existing world. He remains therefore, ‘wholly conservative in practice’.<sup>146</sup> By means of the peculiar “ideological trick” performed by philosophy, the existing world of class domination, oppression, and human suffering is sanctioned and preserved. As Balibar posits, through the ideological mechanism there is an ‘astonishing conversion of impotence into domination: the abstraction of consciousness, which is an expression of consciousness’s incapacity to act in reality (the loss of its “immanence”), becomes the source of a power precisely because it is “autonomized”’.<sup>147</sup> The traditional understanding of philosophy as a detached, purely disinterested pursuit of “truth” and understanding is fundamentally displaced onto the alternative terrain of class power and domination. Marx indeed broke with traditional conceptions of philosophy, by showing that ‘philosophy is not an autonomous activity, but one determined by the position it occupies in the field of social conflicts and, in particular, in that of the class struggle’, thereby placing in question ‘the very essence of philosophical activity: its contents, its style, its method, its intellectual and political functions . . . *after Marx, philosophy is no longer as it was before*’. In short, ‘What happened with Marx was precisely a displacement of the site and the questions and objectives of philosophy’.<sup>148</sup>

Therefore, while the omnipresent language of distortion and illusion to characterize ideology, together with its contraposition to the firm ground of empirical science, is understandable both within the polemical context of Marx’s formulations and the pressing need to overcome the speculative abstractions of German philosophy, and within the terms of the pre-existing meaning of the term “ideology” in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, including its earlier conceptual genealogy, such terminological rhetoric nevertheless obscures the central organizing perspective of class domination within which Marx developed the concept, and with that, also the profound innovatory insights implicitly contained therein. Instead of a facile, one-sided repudiation of all ideology and philosophy as pure delusion, Marx’s rupture with Feuerbach’s materialist humanism through the concepts of praxis and “the inner strife and intrinsic contradictoriness” of the historical ensemble of social relations, created the foundations for a fundamental paradigm-shift in the critical analysis of ideas. It was precisely by understanding the entire field of thought and consciousness as necessarily constituted *inside* historically determinate, antagonistic social and class relations, that Marx was not led in the direction of a simple rejection of ideas as purely illusory, but rather, towards a new way of thinking through the ideational in terms of its specific positioning and

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<sup>145</sup> CW: 5: 30.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid. 293.

<sup>147</sup> Balibar 1995, 46-7.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid. 4-5.

mode of functioning inside social structures of class domination. This implied an approach to understanding ideas not so much in the traditional terms of their particular internal content or truth value, but rather, in terms of their practical power and modes of effectiveness within the field or arena of class struggle and conflict.

### 5.11 The eclipse of ideology

Marx, however, did not further pursue this path opened up by the conception of ideology he adumbrated. Although omnipresent in *The German Ideology*, the term's appearance was rare thereafter. Balibar notes the 'odd distribution of the term', whose presence, after 1845-46, was 'reduced to a few peripheral appearances in the period 1847-52', and after which ideology 'almost vanished from the discourse of Marx and Engels'.<sup>149</sup> One possible factor that accounts for its supersession lies in the fact, as we have seen, that the concept was developed primarily as a response to Stirner, and through him, the whole Left-Hegelian philosophical movement, and Hegel himself, as the original source of their speculative abstractions. Given that its formulation was a product of Marx's critical confrontation with German philosophy, the importance and utility of the concept would have receded together with the critical preoccupation with philosophy itself. And this is what in fact transpired. Marx and Engels, as previously indicated, genuinely believed that they had at last achieved their final and irrevocable break with the whole of philosophy itself. In their own retrospective view, they had indeed settled accounts with their former philosophical conscience, and they had reached self-clarification, despite their unsuccessful attempts to publish the manuscript.<sup>150</sup> Corresponding to this decisive rupture with all philosophy was a noticeable decline in Marx's and Engels's preoccupation with philosophical matters after *The German Ideology*, and thus, also the receding significance of the ideology-critical theory they had just outlined.

A second possible reason for the eclipse of ideology after 1845-46 has to do with the question of the extent to which Marx was really aware of the theoretical innovations implicit in the conception of ideology he developed. I have attempted to illustrate how, by moving beyond the one-sided antithesis between science and ideology, and apprehending the category in terms of the problematic of domination within which its articulation was inscribed, that Marx had, at the very least, laid the foundations of a

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<sup>149</sup> Balibar 1988, 161-2.

<sup>150</sup> CW: 29: 264.

novel approach to understanding ideas and philosophy in terms of their effectiveness and specific modes of functioning within relations of class conflict and domination. But the fact remains that these original insights are, for the most part, only implicit in Marx's arguments. The sheer frequency with which ideological and philosophical forms are denounced as forms of distortion, mystification, and illusion should lead one to cast doubt on Marx's own awareness of the new theoretical continent opened up by his conception of ideology. He is much more insistent and emphatic about the illusory and distorted character of ideologies and philosophy than he is about their importance and efficacy in cementing regimes of class power and domination, although his various contentions clearly imply the latter. There is, in other words, a tension between Marx's explicit stress on the illusory character of ideology and the implicit recognition of their effective functioning and indispensability within the framework of antagonistic class relations and social struggle.

This tension is perhaps nowhere more palpable than in his critique of philosophy, wherein it is its speculative, abstract, and illusory character that is repeatedly and ruthlessly emphasized, whereas the actual arguments Marx makes unequivocally suggest the need to take very seriously these philosophical conceptions from the standpoint of understanding and assessing their functioning as forms of class power. Despite the limits and superficiality of the dichotomous opposition between science and ideology for an understanding of the underlying significance, originality, and specificity of his concept of ideology, it nevertheless largely corresponds to the way in which Marx appears to have understood his enterprise in *The German Ideology*. The consequence is that Marx was not led to pursue and further develop the new theoretical terrain opened up by the concept because he was probably not fully conscious of the fact that he had done so in the first place. Accordingly, instead of pointing out the novel insights implicit in their critique of ideology, Marx's and Engels' own accounts of their achievements in *The German Ideology* are largely confined to that of having cleared away the speculative illusions and distortions of ideology and philosophy, thus paving the way for the true project, namely, that of the scientific critique and analysis of political economy.<sup>151</sup>

The fact that Marx's principal theoretical concern at this time was that of further pursuing and deepening his studies of political economy is, itself, potentially one of the factors that contributed to the eclipse of the problematic of ideology. Marx's theory of ideology, though effective as a way of dealing with the various religious, philosophical, legal and political forms of social consciousness, was not nearly as serviceable when it came to dealing with the so-called "bourgeois" economists. The theories of the classical political economists do not fit well within the schema of inversion and speculative detachment

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<sup>151</sup> See for example CW: 17: 79, CW: 29: 264-5.

indicated by the theory of ideology. On the contrary, the British and French economists, as Marx acknowledges, had taken the various modes of production and exchange, the division of labor, the forms of ownership, and the structure of civil society, as their principal analytical object. Moreover, Marx himself had taken over key categories from the classical economists and the Scottish historical school in order to elaborate his own “scientific” materialist conception of history which he had used to counter the various forms of ideology.<sup>152</sup> As Marx further pursued his researches in political economy in subsequent years, the need to cope with the above difficulty and confront the theories of the economists would lead him to develop a *new* theory, namely, that of commodity fetishism.<sup>153</sup>

A final factor that might account for the abandonment of the concept of ideology relates to problems internal to the theory itself. One would think, as Marx’s analysis implies, that the proletariat is also a particular class formed within the structure of modern bourgeois civil society, and therefore, possesses its own particular interests for the realization of which they must struggle against the opposed interests of the bourgeoisie. In other words, one would think that the proletariat, like other classes struggling for dominance, is compelled to present its particular class interests in the form of the general, universal interests of all, and hence, that the proletariat too is caught up within the ideological struggle at the center of politics and class struggle. As Marx himself tells us, ‘every class which is aiming at domination, even when its domination, as is the case with the proletariat, leads to the abolition of the old form of society in its entirety and of domination in general, must first conquer political power in order to represent its interest in turn as the general interest, which in the first moment it is forced to do’.<sup>154</sup> Such statements seem to suggest that the proletariat, like other classes, must ideologically articulate its own particular class needs and interests by subsuming them within the ideal, general form of universality within the framework of politics and the class struggle. Hence, corresponding to the mutual struggles between antagonistic classes would be a real ideological struggle, i.e. a genuine clash between the ideological representations through which classes struggling against each other attempt to elaborate and present their own particular interests as the general, universal interests of everyone. Marx seems to suggest this, when he argues that the contradiction between the productive forces and forms of intercourse, and the revolutionary struggles this engenders, assumes at the same time, ‘various subsidiary forms, such as all-embracing collisions, collisions of various classes, contradictions of consciousness, battle of ideas, political struggle, etc.’<sup>155</sup> Here, one is reminded of the famous expression from the 1859 Preface, concerning ‘the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic — in short, ideological forms in

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<sup>152</sup> Balibar 1988, 167-8, also Balibar 1995, 55-6.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> CW: 5: 46-7.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid. 74.

which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out'.<sup>156</sup> Likewise, one would think that if there is a dominant ideology of the ruling class which manages to prevail and reign supreme in a particular historical epoch, then there would, correspondingly, be a dominated ideology, i.e. the domination of one ideological discourse or set of representations over another.

This is not the case, because Marx regards the proletariat as the embodiment of true, genuine universality. As a consequence, he does not carry out the above logic that seems to be implicit in his arguments. The proletariat appears, somewhat paradoxically, as a class which is not really a class, a sort of non-class class. This is because the proletariat is not ultimately conceived as a class with particular interests. Marx posits that the practical dissolution of the existence of classes can only be accomplished by a class 'which has no longer any particular class interest to assert against a ruling class'.<sup>157</sup> Instead, he explicitly avers the 'universal character' of the proletariat.<sup>158</sup>

The consequence of this idea is that there is no such thing as an ideology of the proletariat or a proletarian ideology (which would be a contradiction in terms).<sup>159</sup> Since the proletariat has a universal character, and therefore, has no particular class interests to assert, it is necessarily outside the space of ideology. In Balibar's pithy formulation of the problem,

The proletariat is first and foremost a class, the class antagonist of the bourgeoisie, and hence places its own interests above theirs. Put like this, however, the proletariat would, by definition, lack universality, or, more precisely, it would be caught up in turn within the mystifying and abstracting process that subsumes a "specific interest" into a "general interest." For the interests of the proletariat to tally with a real universality, with practice as such, those interests must cease to be class interests; and for that to happen, the proletariat itself must *cease to be a class*, must be a class/nonclass.<sup>160</sup>

Problematically, this sometimes leads Marx to portray the proletarian masses as somehow impervious to the effects of bourgeois ideology. Quite aside from the issue concerning the impossibility of a proletarian ideology, the notion that the proletariat is unaffected by ruling class ideologies threatens to undermine his whole account of ideology. Thus, for example, Marx writes, referring to religious and philosophical conceptions, that 'For the mass of men, i.e., the proletariat, these theoretical notions do not

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<sup>156</sup> CW: 29: 263.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid. 77.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid. 88.

<sup>159</sup> Balibar 1995, 54.

<sup>160</sup> Balibar 1988, 166.

exist and hence do not require to be dissolved, and if this mass ever had any theoretical notions, e.g., religion, these have now long been dissolved by circumstances'.<sup>161</sup> This denial of the active penetration of ideological conceptions on the consciousness of the proletarian masses is fundamentally inconsistent with his whole theorization of ideological class domination. Obviously, if the various forms of ideological representation had no effect on the thinking of the subordinated working masses, there would be no need for the dominant bourgeois class to give ideological form and articulation to its economic and material class interests. Ideological and intellectual rule would be utterly superfluous.

This is, I think, symptomatic of the tension, suggested earlier, between Marx's tacit recognition of the practical power and efficacy of ideologies implied in his account of ruling class power and domination, and on the other hand, his countervailing tendency to diminish the various forms of ideology as pure illusion, a tension which traverses the whole manuscript. The context of the above quoted passage is a case in point; instead of drawing out the potentially rich implications of his critique of philosophy within the terms of class struggle and ruling class ideological domination, Marx is denouncing philosophy as a purely German phenomenon of 'theoretical bubble-blowing', and 'ready-made nonsense'.<sup>162</sup> This type of outright dismissal of the ideological field serves to minimize the real impact of ideological conceptions on the masses, and thus, their capacity to contribute to the maintenance and reproduction of conditions of class rule. Nevertheless, the whole underlying thrust of Marx's analysis of ideology outweighs such utterances. The impact of ruling class ideology on the oppressed is, not only the implicit basis of his whole account of ideology as a form of domination, but is in fact explicitly acknowledged by Marx.

### 5.12 Revolutionary praxis as the site of truth and knowledge

The antidote to the domination of ruling class ideologies lies in the revolutionary political practice of the proletarian masses. Thus,

Both for the production on a mass scale of this communist consciousness, and for the success of the cause itself, the alteration of men on a mass scale is necessary, an alteration which can only take place in a practical movement, a *revolution*; the revolution is necessary, therefore, not only

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<sup>161</sup> CW: 5: 56.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

because the *ruling* class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the class *overthrowing* it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew.<sup>163</sup>

The communist revolution is necessary, not only in order to overthrow the old ruling class, but also because in the course of the revolutionary struggle itself the proletarian masses transform their consciousness ‘ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew’, or as Marx put it elsewhere, in the revolutionary struggle the proletariat ‘rids itself of everything that still clings to it from its previous position in society’. The communist revolution, in other words, is necessary not only in order to overthrow ‘the power of the earlier mode of production and intercourse’, thereby reorganizing ‘the relations of production and form of intercourse on a new basis’, but also because the practical, revolutionary struggle itself enables the masses to break free from ruling class ideological representations.<sup>164</sup> Thus, when a revolutionary ‘practical collision occurs in which the class itself is endangered . . . there also vanishes the appearance of the ruling ideas being not the ideas of the ruling class and having a power distinct from the power of this class. The existence of revolutionary ideas in a particular period presupposes the existence of a revolutionary class’.<sup>165</sup> The revolutionary class struggle exposes to the workers the true character of ‘the old traditional ideas’ in which actual private interests, etc., etc., are expressed as universal interests’.<sup>166</sup>

This is moreover, not to be understood as a singular revolutionary event or sudden rupture with the old ruling ideas, but is rather the result of a longer term process of struggle, organization, and augmentation of consciousness. Only through this process of struggle can the workers become revolutionary, thus constituting themselves as a class in the genuine sense: ‘The separate individuals form a class only insofar as they have to carry on a common battle against the other class’.<sup>167</sup> Hence, the workers do not start out with a revolutionary consciousness, but only acquire this over the course of struggle: ‘Even a minority of workers who combine and go on strike very soon find themselves compelled to act in a revolutionary way - a fact he [Stirner] could have learned from the 1842 uprising in England and the from the earlier Welsh uprising of 1839’.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid. 52-3.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid. 60.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid. 293.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid. 77.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid. 204-5.



We can therefore see how the question of truth is not at all a “scholastic” philosophical question of mere theory, abstract reflection, and interpretation, but rather, a *practical* question. Only through a practical movement of struggle, in which there emerges that revolutionary, practical-critical, activity of the proletarian masses can the preponderance and solidity of ruling class ideologies be broken down, and in the last analysis, definitively dissolved through their revolutionary triumph:

This whole appearance, that the rule of a certain class is only the rule of certain ideas, comes to a natural end, of course, as soon as class rule in general ceases to be the form in which society is organized, that is to say, as soon as it is no longer necessary to represent a particular interest as general or the “general interest” as ruling.<sup>169</sup>

In this sense, the site of truth and knowledge lies in the *revolutionäre Praxis* of the proletarian masses, since in the course of revolutionary struggle itself, the workers, in transforming material and social circumstances simultaneously transform themselves and their thinking about the world: ‘In revolutionary activity the changing of oneself coincides with the changing of circumstances’.<sup>170</sup> The breakdown of ideological representations and the development of communist consciousness emerge out of the revolutionary praxis of the communist proletarians. As Marx stresses, ‘communism is a highly practical movement, pursuing practical aims by practical means’, ‘the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things’, and in which, in the course of ‘revolutionizing the existing world’, the workers, at the same time, ‘practically [come] to grips with’ it.<sup>171</sup> Further amplifying the claims in the *Theses*, in the revolutionary, practical-critical, activity of the workers, there is a coincidence of the changing of circumstances and human beings themselves, interpreting and doing, theory and practice, knowledge/understanding and political action. The “truth”, i.e. the reality and power, the this-worldliness (*Diesseitigkeit*) of the thought and consciousness of the communist proletarians is demonstrated in practice, that is, in the revolutionary struggle itself, and ultimately through their definitive triumph, i.e. the practical dissolution and complete negation of all ideological illusions.

Finally, we can note that this conception does not rule out the need for communist theoreticians and intellectuals. Revolutionary communist ideas presuppose the existence of a revolutionary class.<sup>172</sup> In other words, revolutionary consciousness emanates from the revolutionary proletarian masses themselves.<sup>173</sup> Nevertheless, communist consciousness can also arise among members of other classes too

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid. 61.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid. 214.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid. 215, 49, 38.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid. 60.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid. 52.

‘through the contemplation of the situation’ of the proletariat.<sup>174</sup> Such people can become the communist theoreticians and representatives of the proletariat, performing the important function of articulating and clarifying communist ideas. These ‘communist theoreticians, the only communists who have time to devote to the study of history’ have discovered the conflict between private and general interest running throughout history.<sup>175</sup> But, if ‘the theoretical representatives of the proletariat wish their literary activity to have any practical effect, they must first and foremost insist that all phrases are dropped which tend to dim the realization of the sharpness of this opposition, all phrases which tend to conceal this opposition’ between ‘the actual property-owners’ and ‘the propertyless communist proletarians’.<sup>176</sup> In the political context of revolutionary class struggle, communist theoreticians and intellectuals can assist the workers in overcoming ideological forms of consciousness by exposing the real class conflicts and contradictions underlying the veils of ideological representations. Such communist theoreticians are products of the division between material and intellectual labor in modern bourgeois society, but have nevertheless managed to transition to the standpoint of another class. This makes clear that Marx’s conception is not so much a positional, as a functional one; the necessary class character and class constitution of consciousness does not mean that peoples’ particular class origins necessarily determine their respective outlooks. It is, rather, more a question of the specific social and political functions performed by theorists and intellectuals within the structure of class relations and the division of labor. In the case of the communist theoreticians, the important social and political functions they perform as theoretical representatives and intellectuals of the proletariat do not, of course, make them proletarian ideologists or ideologists of the proletarian masses, since unlike the ruling class conceptive ideologists, the communist theoreticians have adopted the “standpoint” of the truly universal interests of all humanity by being the representatives of the universal class of revolutionary proletarians. There can be no proletarian ideology, and thus, no proletarian ideologists.

### 5.13 Conclusions

Marx’s development of a critical conception of ideology was ultimately a rather short-lived, transient moment within his broader intellectual trajectory, a specific conjunctural product of his critical

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<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid. 247.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid. 469.

confrontation with and attempted refutation of philosophy *tout court*, but taking the form of an attack on Hegelian and post-Hegelian philosophy, particularly Stirner. Both Marx and Engels understood this enterprise as one of definitively dispensing with and superseding all ideological and philosophical conceptions, understood as speculative and illusory detachments, or “inversions”, of the true, scientific ground constituted by the examination and study of the historical development of material production and corresponding social relations or forms of intercourse, i.e. the “materialist” and scientific foundation provided by the structure of civil society, industry, and exchange and their historical development. Viewed from this angle, that is the actual standpoint from which Marx himself conceived his critical analysis of ideology, he did little more than adopt a critical conceptual and terminological distinction already fixed in nineteenth century Germany, according to which ideology referred pejoratively to a set of abstract and speculative ideas in sharp contrast to a more exact, scientific and empirical understanding of reality. It is a critical schema that combines the previously established sense of the term and meaning of ideology with Feuerbach’s critical metaphor of German speculative philosophy and idealist metaphysics as a mystifying and distorted inversion of reality. In this case, Marx’s chief innovation in *The German Ideology* with respect to his earlier work consists in having applied Feuerbach’s metaphor of inversion, not simply to German speculative philosophy and idealist metaphysics, as was the case in the *Manuscripts* and *The Holy Family*, but to philosophy as a whole. Hence, rather than criticizing and rejecting German idealism as a speculative and inverted philosophical distortion by appealing to the modern materialist philosophical tradition and the materialistic and naturalistic philosophical humanism of Feuerbach, Marx can now, in the wake of the theoretical rupture accomplished in the *Theses*, account for philosophy *tout court*, whether idealist or materialist, as a speculative detachment to be explained historically in terms of class relations and the division between material and mental labor. Here, the categories of Praxis and the historical ensemble of the social relations from the *Theses*, represent the conceptual foundations of the scientific ground of history constituted by the mode of production of material life and corresponding social forms of intercourse, i.e. the diametric opposite of the speculative illusions of ideology, but which is also the explanatory basis and foundation of the origin and constitution of ideological mystification. The deployment of this binary conceptual opposition between empirical science and ideology/philosophy served a primarily polemical and rhetorical function within the terms of Marx’s scathing repudiation of all ideology, even and especially of philosophical thought as its quintessential form. It represents basically an appeal to common sense or empirical observation and the study of actual historical, social, and economic facts in the face of the speculative delusions and mystifications characteristic of ideological and philosophical consciousness. Conceived in this way, i.e. in the manner in which Marx himself seems to have understood his critique of ideology, the gulf separating his and Gramsci’s conceptions of ideology and philosophy could not be greater.

On the other hand, Marx's actual critical confrontation with the left-Hegelian conviction in the omnipotence of ideas and philosophical concepts over the real world, particularly as this belief manifested itself in Stirner's speculative conception of the nexus between power and ideas, domination and conceptual abstractions, pointed unequivocally to an alternative conception of ideology and philosophy construed within the terms of their effective power and modes of functioning as intellectual and theoretical mechanisms buttressing the real material conditions of a class' rule and domination. Marx's entire critical analysis of ideology in *The German Ideology* is traversed by this fundamental tension between these two quite different frameworks for understanding ideological and philosophical forms of consciousness. It is a tension characterized between, on the one hand, an understanding of ideology, and especially philosophy, as mere forms of speculative illusion and mystification to be counteracted by appealing to the facts of common sense, i.e. the study of literary materials relating to empirical facts and data concerning history, economy, and society, and on the other hand, an understanding of ideological and philosophical forms as real, effective, and operative forms through which a dominant class manages to give general and universal form to their particular material class interests. The former perspective leads Marx towards a depreciation and dismissal of the ideological terrain that seriously threatens to undermine his entire account of ideology as an efficacious modality of class power and domination. Taken to the extreme, it leads him to present the various ideological forms of social consciousness, e.g. religion and philosophy, as not having any real existence or impact on the thinking of the masses, a conception which renders utterly incoherent his whole account of the absolute indispensability of ideological and intellectual class rule. Contrariwise, the latter perspective suggests that critical emphasis be placed, less on the character of ideologies as forms of distortion and mystification, but rather, on the crucial necessity for any effective political struggle aimed at challenging ruling class forms of ideological representation, of understanding the complex mechanics and operations of ideologies within the terms of ruling class power and domination.

These two perspectives, in other words, imply two completely different ways of approaching and comprehending the ideological terrain. According to the first framework, ideologies are inconsequential mirages, whereas according to the latter approach, ideologies constitute a real terrain of class struggle, i.e. the intellectual and theoretical discourses and forms of representation through which the ruling class is able to solidify and cement the material and economic conditions of their domination. Within this latter prism, ideologies are crucial and indispensable components of politics and the class struggle, and it follows that philosophy, as the supreme consummation of the ideological mechanism through which the indissoluble nexus between theories and the material conditions of class power is wholly severed and

concealed, is not merely “theoretical bubble-blowing”, but instead, performs a crucial contribution to the maintenance and reproduction of regimes of class power.

Viewed from this latter standpoint, Marx’s framework for understanding ideology and philosophy is not fundamentally dissimilar to Gramsci’s. Precisely because Marx, in confronting Stirner, was compelled to consider the problem of the nature and mechanics of ruling class power, and the specific role performed by theories and ideas in the politics of class struggle and domination, he was led towards a mode of understanding of the ideological and intellectual terrain that, to a significant extent, resembled Gramsci’s thesis of the superstructural and ideological terrain as a real, objective, and operative reality, i.e. real and effective forms through which political class struggles are fought out at the ideological, intellectual, and theoretical levels, the forms of representation through which particular class needs and interests are given general and universal ideal form. And Marx could do so because, as we have already seen, he did not reject Stirner’s thesis of the nexus between power and ideas, but instead, sketched the outlines of an alternative perspective in which the efficacy of ideas could be grasped in the much more realistic, non-speculative terms of their functioning within historically determinate material and class relations.

Not unlike Gramsci, the conception of the *Theses* according to which theories and ideas are historically determinate material, social, and practical relations, hence, their “earthly” and “secular” basis in the inner strife and intrinsic contradictoriness of the ensemble of social relations furnished Marx with a basic conceptual framework within which such an understanding of ideas was made possible. It is a framework that pointed to the necessary class character and class constitution of all consciousness, and therefore, the ideological and political functions performed by the various forms of social consciousness in consolidating class rule and domination. Furthermore, it is because he elaborated a critical theory of ideology within the terms of class power and domination, that Marx can be legitimately regarded as the founder of the modern concept of ideology, taking the term and concept well beyond its pre-existing pejorative sense as a mere set of abstract and speculative ideas.

Within the terms of his broader critique of ideology, Marx displaced the traditional conception of philosophy as an autonomous, detached, and transcendent activity by posing the status of philosophy and philosophical activity in terms of its specific positioning and mode of functioning as an ideological mechanism within the structure of class relations and antagonisms. Such an understanding of philosophy remained, however, only an implicit corollary of his critical analysis of ideology, continually undermined by Marx’s countervailing tendency to dismissively reduce philosophy, as well as ideological conceptions in general, to mere illusions without any practical effects.

That being said, even if Marx had tried to develop more fully and systematically his conception of ideology, he would not have arrived at anything resembling Gramsci's dilated, gnoseological understanding of the category. The former's construal of the proletariat as a class with no particular class interests precludes any possibility of the thought and conceptions of the proletariat having an ideological status. To the extent that the proletarian masses' thinking is ideological, this can only be a function of the effects of ruling class ideologies on their own thinking and understanding about the social world. Although much of Marx's theoretical analysis, including some of his statements, seems to point towards a real ideological struggle corresponding to the class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, we have seen that this is not actually the case, since the proletariat has no particular class interests to assert against those of the bourgeoisie, and therefore does not need to worry about ideologically translating any particular class interests into universal ones, since the proletariat is, according to Marx's own definition, genuinely universal. For the same reason, he would never have fused the question of truth with the ideological. To the extent that Marx did understand the concept of truth in terms of politics, that is in terms of the reality, power, and *Diesseitigkeit* of thinking that practically and politically realizes itself in the world through revolutionary struggle, this was sharply contrasted with the field of ideological representations. The fictive forms of universality represented by the various ideological representations are broken up and dissolved within the framework of the revolutionary practical-critical activity of the proletariat. Truth as politics constitutes the antipode of all ideology.

Nor is it at all possible that Marx would have ever articulated his own theory, or the theoretical conceptions of the proletarian masses in the terms of philosophy. This is not only because of the non-ideological status of the proletariat, which obviously makes it also outside the philosophical field. Even if Marx had regarded the proletariat as a class which, like other classes, needed to given ideal, universal and ideological expression to its particular class interests, it is quite simply unthinkable that Marx would have conceived this within the terms of philosophy, either as a general conception of the world, or some other form. We have seen earlier that Marx attempted to assimilate philosophy and philosophical criticism with a radical project of social and political transformation, and human liberation. This was his central problematic in his early years, during which he focused his efforts on figuring out how philosophy could practically realize itself in the world, thereby making the latter genuinely human. Following his break with the Hegelian conception of the state as the embodiment of rational and universal philosophical principles, Marx moved in 1843 towards a conception of philosophy that would be linked to a mass politics, i.e. a philosophy that could become a material force by basing itself in the needs of "suffering humanity". Philosophy, as he had argued, could only become true and actual through an alliance with politics, which meant, by the time of the "Introduction", that philosophy had to find its material basis in

the strivings of the proletariat. This is undoubtedly the closest Marx ever came to thinking that there could be a philosophy re-conceptualized and re-articulated in terms of a mass politics, i.e. a philosophy in the service of the mass of exploited and oppressed proletarians. But we have also seen that this was not at all a conception of philosophy by, or of, the workers, but rather, a profoundly elitist conception in which the philosophers and intellectuals played the active role of intellectual and theoretical elaboration, while the masses were conceived only as the passive material base of the activity of the philosophers.

Marx definitively transcended this whole problematic of figuring out how philosophy and philosophical critique could be mobilized as an integral element of the human struggle for liberation once he realized, as a consequence of his contacts with the workers' movements in Paris, that the workers could actively develop and appropriate theoretical consciousness for themselves within the framework of politics and the class struggle. The young Marx was, as previously indicated, far from alone in thinking philosophy within the terms of its potential transformative social and political effects, viewed from the standpoint of its active contribution to human liberation, or as they put it, the genuine realization of the essence of man. The young Hegelians were, in reality, the radical and subversive intelligentsia of their day, whose criticisms of the reactionary Prussian regime inevitably assumed the form of philosophical critique, given the repressive police state conditions in Prussia, as well as its economic and social underdevelopment. Consequently, none of the left-Hegelians, as earlier indicated, were interested in philosophy as a purely scholastic and academic exercise. Philosophy, they hoped, would have practical effects in transforming the backward and oppressive conditions of Prussia. Marx's thinking about philosophy in his early years up to late 1843 and early 1844 is incomprehensible outside of this context. But once Marx realized the capacity of workers to liberate themselves, both practically and theoretically, he came to see philosophy as ultimately an activity narrowly confined to the petty-bourgeois class of scholars and intellectuals mainly in Germany, and in complete detachment from the real terrain of social and political struggle, an eminently elitist and top-down conception of social transformation in which the intellectuals and philosophers pontificate to the inert and brainwashed workers (if they even approach the masses at all).

The principal and ultimately decisive reason for Marx's scathing repudiation of all philosophy was political. It is not a mere coincidence that he launched his first major critique of left-Hegelian philosophy (*The Holy Family*) in the wake of the Silesian weaver's rebellion and his subsequent thesis, in the "Critical Marginal Notes", of the proletariat as the active element in its own emancipation, capable of appropriating theory for themselves. And Marx attempted, immediately afterward, to articulate a mass-based, proletarian communism in direct opposition to the elitist philosophical and political conceptions of the left-Hegelians, particular Bauer and Co., within the framework of the modern materialist

philosophical tradition and Feuerbach's humanism. The political theory of communism as the revolutionary, practical-critical, activity, or self-liberation of the proletariat, whose basic seeds emerged in the *Theses*, and were then further expanded upon in *The German Ideology*, represents the ultimate repudiation of all philosophy. In the face of the purely speculative and interpretive activity of the philosophers and intellectuals, who demand that we merely interpret social reality in another way, and recognize it by means of another interpretation, Marx posited the exploited and oppressed proletarian working masses as the practical agents of their own revolutionary self-emancipation. Proletarian-based communism, as the real movement which abolishes the present state of things, which pursues practical aims by practical means, represents the true negation of the scholastic activity of philosophers.

In short, the notion of philosophy as the theoretical expression of the proletariat, i.e. a philosophy "from below", which is of, and by, the workers was wholly outside of Marx's intellectual purview. Taking the left-Hegelians as his principal reference point, Marx was unable to think about philosophy outside of the understanding of it as a hopelessly detached, intellectual and theoretical enterprise unserviceable to working class and communist politics. It is obvious, in other words, that Marx's *Theses* are not at all understood by him as the basis of a new conception of philosophy, or philosophy of praxis, a fact confirmed by even the most cursory reading of *The German Ideology* written right after. Therefore, Marx's opposition to philosophy, as he understood it, was not only an intellectual matter, but also, and above all, a political matter. Marx's other key task in *The German ideology*, aside from refuting Stirner, lay in refuting the German True Socialists, who Marx saw as the political consequence of left-Hegelianism. It is from this vantage point that we can understand the sheer vehemence with which Marx attacked philosophy root and branch. For precise political reasons, he was unwilling to concede any ground, whether intellectual or political, to German philosophy.



## **Chapter Six**

### **Marx and Gramsci**

#### **6.1 Bringing the two together**

The aim of this final chapter consists in bringing together the threads of the previous analyses of Gramsci's and Marx's respective frameworks for understanding philosophy and hence, ideology. As the previous chapter argued, beneath Marx's scathing repudiation of ideology and philosophy as illusory and mystified detachments from the material world, lay an alternative analysis of the essential role they play within relations of social conflict in solidifying relations of class power and domination. As already intimated, this type of analytical framework constitutes an important point of continuity with Gramsci's own. Indeed, as I attempt to highlight in the next section, there are, from this standpoint, a number of fascinating parallels between the two thinkers. Nevertheless, as this chapter demonstrates, the fundamental tension that traversed Marx's analysis of ideology and philosophy in *The German Ideology*, continues to resurface in Marx's later (and earlier) work, and particularly in those which were to serve as important reference points for Gramsci's re-reading of Marx. That is, the latter continues to explicitly denounce the reality and efficacy of ideology and philosophy, at the same time that his actual contentions unequivocally imply the converse.

I argue that Gramsci successfully avoids this central tension in Marx precisely because of his rereading of the concept of ideology from the 1859 Preface on the basis of the second thesis on Feuerbach. It was the original framework derived from this rereading that enabled Gramsci to consistently understand the terrain of social consciousness and ideology, and especially philosophy, in terms of their degrees of practical political effects within relations of social power and conflict. It was also the basis on which Gramsci was able to reinterpret the comparison between French politics and German philosophy in Marx's work as a confirmation of the idea of the practical power of speculative philosophical thought, and thus, to attribute to Marx the achievement of radically redefining traditional philosophy as a form of political power. In reality, I suggest that an interrogation of the two thinkers' respective understandings of the comparison is demonstrative of their fundamentally different approaches to understanding and analyzing philosophy. More specifically, it confirms the thesis of the last chapter, according to which

Marx could ultimately only think of philosophy as the speculative nonsense of petty-bourgeois intellectuals, and therefore, the impossibility of any attempt by Marx to re-appropriate philosophy in the service of working class politics.

On the other hand, although Marx did not explicitly develop a concept of immanence, I suggest that Gramsci's reformulation of Marx's thesis of the unity of theory and practice into the terms of an "absolute immanence", or an "absolute worldliness or earthliness" of thought, represents a further development and enrichment of the latter's notion of the "worldliness" of thought that demonstrates its truth, i.e. reality and power, in practice. By re-reading the *Theses* through the lens of Labriola, and Machiavelli, Gramsci was able to make much more explicit than Marx did, the profound link between truth and partiality already implicit in many of Marx's own formulations in the 1840's, as well as the contingent nature of knowing politically, which also had been implicit in some of Marx's claims. This was accomplished against the backdrop of a sophisticated understanding of the terrain of social consciousness and the practical weight they have in shaping the dynamics of political struggle. These elements, combined with the distinctive way in which Gramsci elaborates the unity of theory and practice in terms of an immanent critique of common sense, and the struggle for greater coherence and the capacity to act in a politically effective way, thereby maximizing the truth and practical power of Marxism, represent an enrichment of Marx's own conception of the this-worldliness of revolutionary praxis.

## 6.2 Parallels and convergences

On the basis of the previous chapter it is noticeable that, despite the significant differences between Marx's and Gramsci's respective approaches to understanding ideology and philosophy, there are nevertheless, as earlier suggested, some rather profound and remarkable convergences between the two. In fact, to the extent that Marx elaborated an innovative conception of ideology and philosophy within the terms of the problematic of domination, even if much of these intuitions remained only implicit, he actually succeeded in anticipating a number of profound insights later developed by Gramsci.

From this perspective, Rehmann, whose construal of Marx's theory of ideology moves beyond that of mere "false" consciousness and illusion, rightly points out that some of the arguments of *The German Ideology* contain suggestions 'that are fruitful for understanding hegemonic processes', and

which, to a certain extent, prefigure some of Gramsci's own. Perhaps the most salient among them is Marx's view (which I have argued forms the essence of his conception of ideology) of the necessity of a class that wishes to be dominant 'to present its interest as the common interest of all the members of society, that is, expressed in ideal form: it has to give its ideas the form of universality, and present them as the only rational, universally valid ones',<sup>1</sup> and by means of which it succeeds in mobilizing a broad network of social forces behind its own class project. 'This "translation" of class-interests into the "form of universality"', as Rehmann intimates,<sup>2</sup> represents a prescient insight into Gramsci's later conception of the necessity of a fundamental social class to supersede the narrow limits of its own sectional or economic class interests by "translating" them into the broader, complex sphere of the ideological superstructures, i.e. the articulation of its class interests 'not on a corporate but on a universal level: the hegemony of a fundamental social group over the subordinate groups'.<sup>3</sup> In this way, Marx anticipates Gramsci's later theory of hegemony as the transcendence of economic-corporate class interests, and hence, also the latter's category of catharsis, but also more fundamentally, Gramsci's conception of the importance and centrality of the ideological and superstructural terrain, since a dominant class *must* be able to translate their particular economic interests into the broader intellectual and ideological sphere of universality.

Furthermore, Marx provided fruitful indications, as Gramsci would later accomplish in much greater depth, concerning the actual practices and agents through which ideological and intellectual domination is actively constructed, with his account of the functions performed by ruling class ideologists in solidifying and consolidating a class' domination in the superstructural domain. As Thomas posits, although Marx and Engels, 'writing before the Dreyfus affair in which the term "Intellectual" was established for the first time as a key word of modern political discourse', did not provide 'a comprehensive theory of the structural role of intellectuals in modern society', it is nevertheless true that in *The German Ideology*, they at least 'sketched out perspectives for a theory of the social position and efficacy of intellectuals with their analysis of the historical emergence of the division of labor and critique of the deleterious role of "ideologists" as (conscious or unconscious) defenders of the status quo'.<sup>4</sup> This tentative sketch can undoubtedly be considered a significant theoretical innovation for the time in which Marx and Engels were writing, and one which anticipates in numerous ways Gramsci's later, much more

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<sup>1</sup> CW: 5: 60.

<sup>2</sup> Rehmann 2013, 33.

<sup>3</sup> Q 4, 38, 457-8.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas 2007, 68.

comprehensive analysis and theorization of the social and political functions performed by various types of intellectuals in concretizing a fundamental social group's hegemony in modern social formations.<sup>5</sup>

Nor, we can add, was Marx unaware of the crucial role played by material structures, institutions, and apparatuses in disseminating ideologies, as is implicit in his reference to the significance of the ruling class' control over the *means* of mental production, and by means of which the dominant class is able to 'regulate the production and distribution of the ideas of their age', with the consequence that 'their ideas' become 'the ruling ideas of the epoch', and to which the subordinate classes in society are 'on the whole' subjected.<sup>6</sup> Gramsci would, once again, pursue and further develop, to a great extent, this insight regarding the centrality of ideological apparatuses, with his enquiry into 'the ideological structure of a dominant class', 'in other words the material organization intended to maintain, defend, and develop the theoretical or ideological "front"'.<sup>7</sup> This, in turn, helped provide the seeds for the concept of the "hegemonic apparatuses" by means of which a class's hegemony is given concrete form and specificity, understood in its incorporation within a new theory of the integral state.

It is also necessary to take note of a rather astounding parallel between the two thinkers' accounts of the complex nature and dynamics of ruling class crises, and in particular, the breakdown and deterioration of the ideological and intellectual capacities for rule of the dominant class that such crises evoke. Marx suggested, in effect, two possibilities in such emergency situations, on the one hand, a sudden realignment of elements within the ruling class bloc, and on the other, the emergence and growth of cracks and fissures inside the ruling class. In reality, these two dynamics will often occur simultaneously, as a ruling class in peril struggles continuously to overcome various internal fissures through attempts to consolidate itself and avoid ruination. Marx pointed out, quite perspicaciously, not only that in these types of catastrophic situations, the activity of ruling class thinkers and ideologists intensifies as they struggle all the more relentlessly and tenaciously to cover up the real contradictions

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<sup>5</sup> On Gramsci's theory of intellectuals, cf. Thomas 2007, and Buci-Glucksmann, 1980.

<sup>6</sup> CW: 5: 59. Rehmann conjectures that this is why Marx employed the term "idealistic superstructure", thus combining a term ("idealistic") usually used to designate a worldview or philosophical tradition with "superstructure", a term signifying a material and institutional reality, Rehmann 2013, 31.

<sup>7</sup> This includes 'publishing houses (which either explicitly or implicitly have a program and are linked to a given tendency), political newspapers, journals of all sorts – scientific, literary, philological and so on, periodicals down as far as the parish newsletter . . . Everything that influences or may influence public opinion directly or indirectly belongs to it: libraries, schools, groups and clubs of different kinds, right up to architecture, street lay-out and street names'. All of this forms part of 'the formidable complex of trenches and fortifications of the dominant class' and of which the revolutionary party must have 'an exact knowledge', or as he put it about six months later, a 'reconnaissance of the terrain and identification of the elements of trench and fortress represented by the elements of civil society . . . a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks', Q 3, 49, 332-3, Q 7, 16, 866.

opened up by the crisis, but also that in so doing, the ruling class ideological constructions become all the more abstract and detached from reality, to the point of becoming a conscious and willed form of deception on the part of the ruling class thinkers. Gramsci later expressed, and further elaborated upon, similar perspectives, noting, as we have already seen, that against the backdrop of incurable structural economic crises, the ruling class strives insistently and persistently to heal, within certain limits, these contradictions through various ideological initiatives and forms of struggle.<sup>8</sup> Further, Gramsci suggested, as Marx already did, the growing detachment and overgrowth of speculation when a ruling class enters its historical phase of decadence and decline. Gramsci wrote, in the crucial passage in which speculative philosophy was identified as a moment of hegemony, that ‘Every culture’, has its speculative phase, which perhaps ‘coincides with the moment in which the real hegemony disintegrates while the system of thought perfects and refines itself - which is what happens in periods of decadence’.<sup>9</sup> The counterpart to the emergence of a crisis in the rule of a dominant class in decline is the overgrowth and further detachment of ruling class ideological constructions.

The final, and perhaps most crucial parallel to note concerns their respective approaches to understanding philosophy. I have insinuated that Gramsci was essentially correct in thinking that there was a radical displacement of the traditional conception of philosophy implicit in Marx’s “historical materialism”, and which hinges heavily on the concept of the ensemble of social relations posited in the *Theses*. I attempted to trace Marx’s theoretical movement from the *Theses* to *The German Ideology* written not long after, showing how Marx’s adumbration of a conception of history orbiting around material production (which itself presupposed the theoretical breakthrough accomplished with the categories of *Praxis* and the “social relations” that emerged in the *Theses*), indeed coincided with a historically novel approach to interpreting philosophy *tout court*. This implied the need to understand philosophy, like all thought, in terms of its necessary emergence and constitution within a historically determinate ensemble of antagonistic social and class relations, and therefore, to approach philosophy from the standpoint of its specific positioning and mode of functioning within determinate networks of class conflict, struggle, and domination. Within this analytical framework, I suggested that Marx’s critique of philosophy amounted to something more than a simplistic rejection of philosophy as hopelessly speculative, illusory, and mystical (though it does possess these qualities). As the supreme form of ideological detachment or “inversion”, philosophy functions as the consummation of the ideological mechanism through which the nexus between ideas and the material relations of class power and domination that form their genuine foundation is progressively severed and concealed. Philosophy, as

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<sup>8</sup> Q 4, 38, 455.

<sup>9</sup> Q 8, 238, 1090.

the systematized worldview of the petty-bourgeois class, represents that ideological form of consciousness which, more than any other, radically denies its own historicity, its own concrete conditions of emergence and formation within structures of class conflict and domination. Precisely in virtue of its speculative and detached form, philosophy operates and functions as a form of domination.

This perspective towards philosophy, only tacitly implied in Marx's arguments, is explicitly and systematically developed by Gramsci as part of his attempt to redefine philosophy in terms of its historical determinations and political efficacy as a form of hegemony. This is particularly evident in the latter's extensive critique of Croce examined earlier. Just as Marx contested the Young Hegelians' presentation of their thought as operating at a disinterested and transcendent level of pure conceptual universals, by bringing them "back to earth" and showing how their belief in the rule of concepts over the world had its origin in the real historical process, and the structure of class relations and the division of labor bound up with it, so Gramsci similarly contested the purported status of Croce's speculative historicism as an 'objective science', a 'serene and impartial thought perched above the miseries and contingencies of quotidian struggle', by stripping it down to its real partial, political, and ideological character. Just as Marx decoded the "ideological trick" performed by philosophy in wholly detaching itself from its real class origins, thereby conferring upon itself the appearance of a pure form of universality, so Gramsci did the same both to Croce's historiographical attempt to expunge class struggles and popular movements from history, as well as Croce's philosophical historicism. Furthermore, he did so in part by returning to Marx's thesis of the antagonistic and contradictory ensemble of the social relations, in order to highlight the necessary historical, political, and class constitution of philosophy within the conflictual social terrain. Like Marx, though much more explicitly, Gramsci used this perspective to highlight the effective role played by philosophy in solidifying regimes of class power and domination, and hence, its political and ideological status. In a criticism that closely resembles Marx's own critique of ideology, Gramsci argued that Croce,

thinks he is dealing with a philosophy and he is instead dealing with an ideology . . . he thinks he is writing a history from which every element of class has been exorcised and he is, instead, producing a highly accurate and praiseworthy description of the political masterpiece whereby a particular class manages to present and have the conditions for its existence and development as a class accepted as a universal principle, as a worldview, as a religion. In other words he is describing in the very act the development of a practical means of government and domination.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Q 10, I, 10, 1231.

For both thinkers, philosophy, despite all appearances to the contrary, belongs to the ideological field. Underneath the veneer of transcendence, impartiality, and pure conceptual universals lies the reality of actual history, class conflict and class power. Gramsci in fact recognized just as much as Marx did, that philosophical speculation represented a form of abstraction and detachment which served to obscure, distort, and mystify the real class contradictions and antagonisms by which society was traversed and lacerated. But if this was the case, then the central point for an effective political practice aimed at challenging the exiting regime of class power had to become that of understanding the myriad ways in which philosophy and philosophical practice functioned as a form of class domination, i.e. as ideology.

Viewed from this standpoint, it does not seem to me to be an exaggeration to say that Marx provided at least the basic outlines for an expansive empirical research project into the complex and variegated modalities by means of which a class actually succeeds in establishing and maintaining its domination at every level of society, i.e. through what specific mechanisms, ideas, practices, agents, and institutional apparatuses a class manages to present its particular interests and conditions of class expansion as the common, universal interests and conditions of expansion of the whole of humanity. In so doing, Marx anticipated brilliantly many of the central dimensions of Gramsci's prison researches, not least of which concerned the question of how to approach philosophy.

In short, the operative validity of ideological forms in cementing networks of class power, their effective functioning as part of a class' struggle for social and political power, enabling an ascendant revolutionary class to mobilize a broad base of social forces behind its own particular class project, the translation of particular class interests into general universal interests, the heightened importance of ideological struggle for a ruling class in times of crisis, the social and political functions of different types of intellectuals and ideologists, the importance of controlling the means or apparatuses of mental and intellectual production in order to regulate and control social thought, the social and political functions of philosophical abstractions - all of these potentially fruitful insights embedded within Marx's theoretical sketch of ideology (which unfortunately, for a number of possible reasons previously suggested, he did not further pursue) undoubtedly point towards, rather than away from, Gramsci.

### **6.3 Reexamining Gramsci's rereading**

Nevertheless, the fact remains that these penetrating analyses were adumbrated in a set of draft manuscripts unknown to Gramsci.<sup>11</sup> That the latter could attribute to Marx the achievement of radically displacing the traditional concept of philosophy onto the terrain of social conflict and class power within a broader theorization of the historical validity and efficacy of the various ideological forms of social consciousness, is rooted, among other things, in the peculiar manner in which Gramsci reorganized and reread some of Marx's texts. It will be necessary to reexamine more closely the distinctive way in which he did this now that we have a picture of Marx's own thinking.

As earlier explained, Gramsci's initial return to Marx took shape through a tacit intervention into an earlier debate between Labriola and Gentile (and Croce) centered on the *Theses*. In particular, it was imperative at this incipient stage of prison research to demonstrate the philosophical autonomy and specificity of historical materialism by showing, in the first instance, that Marx superseded the traditional philosophical opposition between materialism and idealism on the basis of the concept of praxis propounded in the *Theses*. Gramsci did not have access to the 1844 *Manuscripts*, in which the concept of sensuous human praxis sketched in the *Theses* found its initial and most eloquent formulation. Instead, his understanding of human work and labor was influenced by Labriola's and Engels' notion of praxis as experimental activity and industry.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, as we can now see, Gramsci was fully justified in repudiating Gentile's dualistic and speculative idealist misinterpretation. Far from a contradictory attempt to fuse subjective praxis, thinkable only within the terms of spiritual and intellectual activity, with a material reality, conceivable only in traditional philosophical terms as a static, ahistorical metaphysics of matter, Marx really had superseded the limits of the prior materialist and idealist philosophical traditions by proposing that it was real, concrete sensuous human activity or praxis (human labor and production) which mediates between humans and their natural and social environment, and in which both terms are mutually and correlatively transformed within a historical framework. In this way, he had rejected not only a conception of reality as a purely spiritual or ideal determination, but also a static, ahistorical metaphysics of matter simply "given" to contemplation. Marx had explicitly rejected the dualism between thought and being, humans and nature. Humans are already in the world, practically and actively, and therefore, thought is necessarily constituted as a historical, material, social, and practical relation. This is simply the conceptual framework Marx had put forth in the *Theses*, and further amplified in *The German*

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<sup>11</sup> Izzo hypothesizes that Gramsci's reference, in two different letters, to an anthology of works on historical materialism that he obtained while in Russia, contained *The German Ideology*, Izzo 2009, 45-6. Obviously, this would have only been the editorially reconstructed first "chapter" on Feuerbach published in Russian in 1924. The letters referred to are one, written from Vienna following his sojourn to Moscow, dated January 14, 1924, and the other, addressed to Zino Zini, is dated January 10, 1924. Nevertheless, as Liguori writes, there is no trace of it in Gramsci's work, Liguori 2004, 132.

<sup>12</sup> Q 4, 47, 473, Q 11, 34, 1448-9, Q 10, II, 31, 1271.



*Ideology*, and which Gramsci himself had taken up by going back to and translating the former, as well as drawing on Labriola's theoretical elaborations, which were themselves, undoubtedly inspired by the *Theses* despite the absence of explicit references to them.

But Gramsci's deeper motivation was not simply to establish that thought is historically produced as a social and practical relation in some vague sense, but more exactly, that the "worldly" or "earthly" basis of all thought lies in 'the inner strife and intrinsic contradictoriness' constitutive of the ensemble of the social relations, and thus, that all thought is formed within an arena of struggle and conflict. We have seen earlier how Gramsci arrived at this conception through a combination of Marx's sixth and fourth theses, and which was in turn, given greater specification and precision by reading these in conjunction with the first part of the *Manifesto*, "Bourgeois and Proletarians", as well as the tacit allusion to *The Poverty of Philosophy*. Bypassing Marx's nebulous theorization of the ensemble of social relations as forms of social intercourse (*Verkehr* or *Verkehrsform*), Gramsci could conceive the inner strife and contradictions of society in the more precise terms in which Marx himself had come to understand them not long after *The German Ideology*, i.e. the social relations grasped as fundamental class antagonisms rooted in contradictory relations of production.

### 6.3.1 The dilated, gnoseological reformulation of ideology

Gramsci's decisive move, which Marx does not make, consisted in taking over these affirmations by Marx, and using them as a foundation on which to explicitly transform politics into an ontological, and therefore, gnoseological thesis, hence, using Marx's affirmations as a theoretical basis for the dilated, gnoseological reformulation of ideology that Gramsci develops through his re-reading of the 1859 Preface on the basis of the *Theses*. The fact that Gramsci widens the ideological field to embraces all the various forms of social consciousness, understood as the multifarious practical and theoretical constructs ("superstructures", "ideological forms"), through which human beings, organized into antagonistic social groups, become conscious of their political tasks and capabilities and struggle to fulfill them, is not exactly a radical proposition given the context in which he was writing. As Rehmann has argued, theoreticians, including Plekhanov, Kautsky, and especially Lenin, helped to underpin 'the paradigm-shift from a critical to a "neutral" notion of ideology', conceived as class-specific conceptions of the world, that is, media or expressions of class interests with the implication that Marxism itself constitutes a form

of ideology.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, this shift, which affected ‘both the “official Marxism” of the Second International and the “Marxism-Leninism” of the Third International’, ‘was facilitated by the fact that *The German Ideology* . . . was unknown to the first generation of Marxists’.<sup>14</sup> In this context, Gramsci’s claims that even Marx’s theories are a superstructure or ideology, that ‘the aim of his theory is also, precisely, to make a specific social group “become conscious” of its own tasks, its own power, its own coming-into-being’ on the ‘ideological terrain of the superstructures’,<sup>15</sup> are not that surprising. As Rehmann rightly points out, it was not only the unpublished state of *The German Ideology* manuscripts, but also the status of the 1859 Preface as a central reference point for later generations of Marxists that helps explain the “paradigm-shift” in the understanding of the concept, Marx’s claim that it was through the ideological forms that ‘men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out’,<sup>16</sup> being interpreted as a confirmation that ideologies are neutral media of class interests, i.e. ‘that the “ideological forms”’, are the ‘forms of consciousness, in which the class-conflicts of society find their expression’.<sup>17</sup>

It seems to me that Marx’s statements regarding ideology in the Preface, to a certain extent, reproduce some of the tensions found in his earlier formulations in *The German Ideology*. On one hand, the epistemological distinction between science and ideology reappears. In the Preface, as Frosini suggests,<sup>18</sup> when Marx calls for the necessity of distinguishing ‘between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic – in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out’, Marx is trying to warn against any confusion between the scientific study of the economic conditions of production and their ideological representations, in the sense that only by means of the precision of the former can major historical events and revolutionary social transformations be adequately judged and comprehended. This interpretation is substantiated by Marx’s immediately following statement that ‘Just as one does not judge an individual by what he thinks about himself, so one cannot judge such a period of transformation by its consciousness, but, on the contrary, this consciousness must be explained from the contradictions of material life, from the conflict existing between the social forces of production and the relations of production’.<sup>19</sup> Such claims are not only reminiscent of some of the contentions in *The German Ideology*, but also with Marx’s claims in the closing paragraphs of the Preface in which, referring to the former text, he says that he and Engels had

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<sup>13</sup> Rehmann 2013, 62-7, and Rehmann 2007, 214-16.

<sup>14</sup> Rehmann 2013, 61-2.

<sup>15</sup> Q 4, 15, 436-7.

<sup>16</sup> CW: 29: 263.

<sup>17</sup> Rehmann 2013, 55.

<sup>18</sup> Frosini 2004, 102-3.

<sup>19</sup> CW: 29: 263.

arrived, in the spring of 1845, at the same conclusions, and consequently, ‘decided to set forth together’ their ‘conception as opposed to the ideological one of German philosophy’.<sup>20</sup> In short, the ‘guiding principle’ of Marx’s studies that he succinctly summarizes in the Preface is the one arrived at in *The German Ideology*, i.e. the study of the mode of production of material life (political economy) as the basis of political, social, and intellectual life. Hence, the closing statement of the Preface - that the entrance to his text, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, is also the entrance to science, in other words the scientific analysis of political economy.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, in both texts, despite the temporal and contextual distance between the two, Marx wants to distinguish the scientific examination of material production and social relations, of political economy, from their ideological modes of representation, the former penetrating into the real nature of the social mode of production.

On the other hand, the ideological forms nevertheless have a real effective utility, since they permit people to become conscious of the conflict between the material productive forces and the relations of production, and struggle for its resolution. If, as I have argued, there was a fundamental tension in *The German Ideology* between a consideration of ideologies as mere forms of misrecognition and illusion, and as historically operative and necessary forms through which the ruling class must solidify its domination, the same type of tension presents itself in the Preface, but in a different variation, since here, the practical utility, necessity, and historical validity of the ideological forms consists in enabling historical actors to consciously grasp the fundamental social antagonism deriving from the economic structure, and also to grasp whatever is required to struggle for its resolution.

And yet, these ideological forms are still supposed to be forms of distortion, mystification, and illusion; despite being the means enabling people to become conscious of the conflict (and fight it out), they can only do so in an inadequate or indirect way, clothed and enwrapped as they are within the veils of ‘legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic’ forms of representation.<sup>22</sup> The “coherence” of these claims, according to Rehmann, is apparently to be explained from Marx’s 1852 claims in the opening paragraphs of the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, that those who make revolutions and carry out major social and historical transformations do so within discourses and language inherited from the past. Thus, the French revolutionaries during the Revolution of 1789 accomplished the historic task of their time - of smashing feudalism and setting up modern bourgeois society through various ideals and forms of self-deception linked to ancient Rome.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, Marx’s distinction in the 1859 Preface between the study of material production, ‘which can be determined with the precision of natural science’ and the ideological forms was

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<sup>20</sup> CW: 29: 264.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 265.

<sup>22</sup> Frosini 2001, 52.

<sup>23</sup> CW: 11: 104.

meant to indicate this gap, described in 1852, between historical agents' own consciousness of their tasks and the real historical functions they are carrying out.<sup>24</sup> Apparently, people accomplish the fundamental tasks of history, but do so unwittingly, within the garbs of language and forms of self-deception inherited from the past. But if this is the case, it becomes very difficult to see how historical actors are in any way becoming conscious of the fundamental conflict between the forces and relations of production in society. Instead, it implies that people at the forefront of major revolutions are merely the confused and self-deceived agents or vehicles through which more fundamental historical laws are operating behind their backs and of which they are unaware.<sup>25</sup>

Regardless of whether Marx intended it, his statements in the Preface imply a positive conception of ideology in which these forms not only permit the attainment of consciousness of the fundamental conflict in the socio-economic structure, but also of the consciousness required to practically struggle for its resolution. Hence, if Marx wished to deny any gnoseological or cognitive value to the ideological terrain, as Frosini affirms,<sup>26</sup> he did not do a very good job.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, the assertion that the ideological forms permit both the consciousness of the economic conflict, and that of the practical means for its resolution is incompatible with the idea from *The German Ideology* that ideologies represent a speculative and illusory form of inversion, that they serve to conceal the contradictions in social reality, and that they only serve the ruling class. Not only that, the Preface seems to suggest precisely what Marx refused to admit in the 1840's, namely, the existence of a real ideological struggle. If he had argued in *The German Ideology*, that the contradiction between the productive forces and forms of intercourse, and the revolutionary struggles this engenders, assumes at the same time, 'various subsidiary forms, such as all-embracing collisions, collisions of various classes, contradictions of consciousness, battle of ideas, political struggle, etc.,'<sup>28</sup> his 1859 claims appear to have made explicit, that these "contradictions of

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<sup>24</sup> Rehmann 2013, 56. One can note that the term "ideology" does not appear in the passages from the *Eighteenth Brumaire* under discussion.

<sup>25</sup> In any case, this only applies to past revolutions. As Marx goes on to write, 'The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped off all superstition about the past. Earlier revolutions required recollections of past world history in order to dull themselves to their own content. In order to arrive at its own content, the revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead. There the words went beyond the content; here the content goes beyond the words', CW: 11: 106.

<sup>26</sup> Frosini 2004, 103.

<sup>27</sup> On this point, I agree with Liguori that Marx's notion of ideology involves a syncretic combination of a "negative" concept of ideology as distortion and illusion contrasted with science, and on the other, a conception of ideologies as useful, necessary, and functional in the class struggle. However, I disagree that this tension exists only within the Preface, and between the Preface and *The German Ideology*. He does not grasp the existence of this tension within the latter work itself, because in it, as is rather common, he sees only the "negative" conception of inverted distortion, Liguori 2004, 133.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 74.

consciousness”, or “battle of ideas” that occur on the field of political struggle constitute ‘the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic – in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out’.<sup>29</sup> Hence, corresponding to the mutual struggles between antagonistic classes there is an ideological struggle, i.e. a genuine clash between the ideological representations and discourses through which classes struggling against each other attempt to elaborate their respective interests, with the obvious implication that it is not only possible, but indeed necessary and desirable for there to be a proletarian ideology if the fundamental contradiction between the forces and relations of production at the heart of capitalist society is to be definitively resolved.

In any case, Marx never succeeded in clarifying what he meant or in accounting for the tensions and incongruities (whether real or apparent) that traverse his various utterances concerning the concept of ideology.<sup>30</sup> That being said, without knowledge of *The German Ideology*, and given the ostensible implications of Marx’s assertions, the negative, epistemological distinction he tries to draw between the economic structure and ideologies would not necessarily have been readily perceptible to later Marxists. It is therefore not shocking that Gramsci took the 1859 Preface (supplemented with Engels’ two late letters<sup>31</sup>) as the basis for attributing to Marx a positive theory of the historical validity and efficacy of the ideological terrain, within the context of his anti-economistic polemics in Notebook 4.

But as we saw earlier, what began as an anti-economistic argument rapidly metamorphosed into something much deeper when Gramsci re-reads the 1859 Preface in conjunction with Marx’s *Theses*. The peculiarity of this attempt to read two texts in harmony with one another that were composed in radically disparate periods in Marx’s intellectual development can be readily conceded. But that Gramsci did so is not at all surprising considering he received the two texts together in the same anthology in 1930. Given this way of reorganizing Marx’s work, Gramsci could easily arrive at his interpretation. If the “worldly” basis of all thought necessarily lies in the social terrain of strife, struggle, and contradictions, as Marx himself indicated in the *Theses*, then the object of thought and knowledge must be this same social world of conflict, as people exist and think only within the latter. As the fourth thesis states, it is this earthly

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<sup>29</sup> CW: 29: 263.

<sup>30</sup> As earlier noted, Marx did not demonstrate any real concern to theorize or continue developing the concept after *The German Ideology*, although the term on occasion reappears. That the term makes an appearance in the Preface of 1859 is, I think, a function of the fact that Marx is giving a short account of his intellectual development leading up to the “guiding thread” he arrived at in *The German Ideology*. There are a few references, mainly to ideologists in the early 1860’s, cf. CW: 31: 35, 184, 197.

<sup>31</sup> I am referring to Engels’ 1890 and 1894 letters, respectively, to Joseph Bloch and Heinz Starkenburg, Italian translations of which Gramsci had prior to his arrest, and both of whose contents were paraphrased by Croce in his *Materialismo storico ed economia marxistica*. See Buttigieg’s “Notes” in Gramsci 1996, 546-7. These famous letters, in which Engels argued against economistic interpretations of historical materialism and affirmed the historical effectiveness of ideologies, were alluded to by Gramsci in, among other places, Q 4, 26, 445, and Q 4, 38, 462.

basis that must be both understood in theory and revolutionized in practice. And the 1859 Preface averred that it is within the various ideological forms of social consciousness that people attain consciousness of the structural economic contradiction at the basis of society. Though Marx only explicitly mentioned the conflict between the forces and relations of production, the fact that it is through ideologies that people also become conscious of the possibility and necessity of resolving it, and “fight it out”, obviously presupposes that they have also become aware that not everyone in society has an interest in definitively resolving it, i.e. ‘the political forces positively working to preserve the structure itself’, ‘striving to heal’ within certain limits, the incurable contradictions that have ‘come to light within the structure’, as Gramsci put it.<sup>32</sup> In other words, the Preface implies that it is through ideologies that people also develop a consciousness of the fundamental social and class antagonisms that lacerate society, and practically struggle against the interests of those classes opposed to a radical transformation of the social structure. As Gramsci wrote, ideologies “organize” the human masses, they establish the ground on which humans move, become conscious of their position, struggle, etc.,’.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, Marx had claimed, in the second thesis, that truth is not a question of theory, but a practical question, and that people must prove the truth, i.e. reality and power of their thinking in practice. In this way, Gramsci could have derived the conception of ideologies as the various modes through which people “demonstrate”, with varying degrees of practical success, the reality and power, i.e. truth of their thinking on the terrain of social and political struggle, and in the last analysis through their actual triumph.<sup>34</sup>

It is thus, that Gramsci could have arrived at the unique theoretical schema in which the classic categories of truth and knowledge are displaced onto the ideological terrain, such that there is no longer any fundamental, qualitative distinction between truth and falsity, ideological and non-ideological (or scientific), but rather, quantitative distinctions between different modes of consciousness according to their varying degrees of practical political power (truth) *within* the ideological terrain, the whole of philosophy included. The second thesis, which Marx had understood as a mutually exclusive opposition between the purely theoretical, scholastic, and interpretive activity of philosophy, and the truth that is concretely realized through the class struggle and the revolutionary praxis of the proletariat, becomes in Gramsci’s reinterpretation, the foundation on which to grasp all thought, and especially philosophy, in terms of its practical power and effects (truth).

### 6.3.2 Translatability: the critical dimension

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<sup>32</sup> Q 4, 38, 455.

<sup>33</sup> Q 7, 19, 869.

<sup>34</sup> Q 4, 38, 455-6.

But the specific way in which Gramsci developed this critical conception of all philosophy, even and especially in its speculative form, in terms of its practical political effects was on the basis of the concept of the mutual or reciprocal translatability between theory and practice, philosophy and politics. For Gramsci, as we have seen, the comparison between French politics and German philosophy had a profound significance, for it indicated that beneath the seemingly abstract and speculative language of philosophy lie precise practical, political, ideological, and hegemonic functions. Speculative philosophy, in this understanding, was not a flight or detachment from concrete reality, but rather, politics in another “language”. This provided the critical framework within which he grasped the historical significance of German classical philosophy, understood as the speculative translation and absorption of the political practice of the Jacobins during the French Revolution within the logic of passive revolution, and which corresponded to the needs of the bourgeoisie during the European Restoration. But it also crucially gave Gramsci a broader perspective in which to redefine and “translate” all philosophy into the terms of its hegemonic organizing functions. This re-conceptualization of philosophy as a mode of doing politics found its clearest expression in his critique of Croce, whose speculative and contemplative philosophical standpoint was translated into its real terms as a practical instrument of domination and social hegemony, as the theorist par excellence of the logic of passive revolution and the Restoration, adapted to the current needs of the European bourgeoisie.

Furthermore, with the exception of Hegel, Gramsci took Marx as the fundamental point of reference for this idea, reorganizing the latter’s texts around the principle of translatability, above all *The Holy Family*, but also the “Introduction”, and the eleventh thesis on Feuerbach. Obviously, the comparison between French politics and German philosophy does appear in some of Marx’s texts. But this fact alone is insufficient for demonstrating a convergence between the two thinkers’ understanding of the comparison. Consistent with the argument I have been advancing, it is primarily in *The German Ideology*, in which Marx was forced to consider the nexus between power and ideas, domination and ideological and philosophical thought, that we find the strongest evidence, in Marx himself, for the notion that the speculative abstractions of German philosophy are a source of practical power within the framework of class domination, and this, as we have seen, was only tacit.

In the “Introduction”, Marx was discussing the backward and anachronistic conditions of Germany in 1843. This real German underdevelopment found its compensation in philosophical development. Thus, he wrote ‘we Germans have gone through our post-history in thought, in *philosophy*.

We are *philosophical* contemporaries of the present without being its *historical* contemporaries'.<sup>35</sup> In this context, he wrote that

The criticism of the *German philosophy of state and law*, which attained its most consistent, richest and final formulation through *Hegel*, is both a critical analysis of the modern state and of the reality connected with it, and the resolute negation of the whole *German political and legal consciousness as practiced* hitherto, the most distinguished, most universal expression of which, raised to the level of a *science*, is the *speculative philosophy of law* itself. If the speculative philosophy of law, that abstract extravagant *thinking* on the modern state, the reality of which remains a thing of the beyond, if only beyond the Rhine, was possible only in Germany, inversely the *German* thought-image of the modern state which disregards *real man* was possible only because and insofar as the modern state itself disregards *real man* or satisfies the *whole* of man only in imagination. In politics the Germans *thought* what other nations *did*. Germany was their *theoretical consciousness*.<sup>36</sup>

These statements are connected to his earlier critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*. The criticism of the Hegelian speculative philosophy of the state is at the same time the criticism of the actual modern state, in the sense that the former, in seeking the idea and reason in the form of the state, had presented the state as the embodiment of unity and universality. The tensions and contradictions of the real world between private self-interest and universal interest, and its historical form as the antinomy between civil society and the political state, were grasped only as apparent tensions reconciled through the essential unity of the absolute and its realization in the rational state. As Marx had written, 'Hegel's chief error is to conceive the *contradiction of appearances as unity in essence, in the idea*, while in fact it has something more profound for its essence, namely, an *essential contradiction*'.<sup>37</sup> The philosophical expression of the state, which presents the latter as the embodiment of the unity of the idea, of reason and universality, is the speculative philosophical expression of real human self-alienation in the abstract, illusory universality of the actually existing modern political state.<sup>38</sup> The disregard for real, "earthly" life in civil society (real man) represented by the philosophical projection of an image of unity in place of the real conflicts in the former, is rendered possible by the real disregard for "man" expressed in the modern state, which can only satisfy the needs of man in the heavenly form of community. The German philosophy of the state is the speculative, conceptual expression of the real alienation of humans in the political state. Thus, by criticizing the former, one is also criticizing the latter, and therefore, also the real

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<sup>35</sup> CW: 3: 180.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 181.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 91.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 28, 31-2.



world of civil society as the basis for alienation in the state. In his article, “The Jewish Question”, written not long before the “Introduction”, Marx had further developed his analysis of the modern state as a heavenly or imaginary way of satisfying the communal and social needs of man in a civil society traversed by particularity and egoism.<sup>39</sup>

The potential practical and political effects of speculative philosophy’s projection of images of unity and rationality in place of the real conflicts in the “earthly” world are clear enough. As Marx said, Hegel’s speculative inversion of subject and predicate has the consequence that the real empirical world is not only left uncomprehended and unexplained, but is even ‘accepted as it is’, and ‘expressed as rational’,<sup>40</sup> the real contradiction between civil society and the state considered a mere appearance that is resolved within the speculative unity of reason and the idea. However, the fact remains that if Marx grasped speculative philosophy in this way, it is not made explicit. His statements could easily be interpreted as a denunciation of Hegel’s speculative absorption of the real world, the latter left uncomprehended and unexplained. And in the “Introduction”, Marx says that the necessity to criticize the German speculative philosophy of the state, that is, the “copy” of the state rather than the real state, is relevant because his specific subject matter was Germany, but that once one moves to the criticism of modern social and political realities, only then does one arrive at the criticism of “truly human problems”, at which point one finds oneself outside Germany.<sup>41</sup> The criticism of religion as a form of human estrangement, in Germany, had been completed, and therefore, criticism must progress to unmasking ‘self-estrangement in its *unholy forms*. Thus the criticism of heaven turns into the criticism of the earth, the *criticism of religion* into the *criticism of law* and the *criticism of theology* into the *criticism of politics*’.<sup>42</sup> The picture here is one of progressively peeling away layers in order to arrive at the real object of critique, the concrete social and political world. And Marx immediately goes on to note that, because he is dealing with Germany, he will have to consider the philosophy of the state, rather than real politics. It is thus, far from clear whether Marx grasps German speculative philosophy as having real and significant practical effects by obscuring the conflicts in the real world, or whether he just wants to clear the ground for real “earthly” criticism within the anachronistic conditions of Germany.

The appearance of the comparison in *The Holy Family*, that is the primary Marxian text to which Gramsci refers in order to develop the notion of translatability, is also probably the most questionable from the standpoint of Gramsci’s interpretation. As we have seen, Marx wrote that,

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 164-6.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. 12, 9.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. 176, 179.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. 176.

If Herr Edgar compares French *equality* with German "self-consciousness" for an instant, he will see that the latter principle expresses *in German*, i.e., in abstract thought, what the former says *in French*, that is, in the language of politics and of thoughtful observation. Self-consciousness is man's equality with himself in pure thought. Equality is man's consciousness of himself in the element of practice, i.e., man's consciousness of other men as his equals and man's attitude to other men as his equals. Equality is the French expression for the unity of human essence, for man's consciousness of his species and his attitude towards his species, for the practical identity of man with man, i.e., for the social or human relation of man to man. Hence, just as destructive criticism in Germany, before it had progressed in *Feuerbach* to the consideration of *real man*, tried to resolve everything definite and existing by the principle of *self-consciousness*, destructive criticism in France tried to do the same by the principle of *equality*.<sup>43</sup>

The abstract German language of "self-consciousness" and the French language of "equality" are two different ways of attempting to express the unity of man or the human essence. But we can infer not only from the context in which this passage appears, but also from the general thrust of the text, that they are not an equal plane for Marx. The passage appears in the course of Marx pursuing a qualified defense of Proudhon's *What is Property* against Edgar Bauer's misunderstandings. For Marx, Proudhon had produced an important treatise on political economy. Rather than taking the existence of private property for granted, Proudhon

makes a critical investigation — the first resolute, ruthless, and at the same time scientific investigation — of the basis of political economy, *private property*. This is the great scientific advance he made, an advance which revolutionizes political economy and for the first time makes a real science of political economy possible. Proudhon's treatise *Qu'est-ce que la propriété?* is as important for modern political economy as Sieyès' work *Qu'est-ce que le tiers état?* for modern politics.

This is in direct contrast to the speculations of Critical Criticism, which understands nothing of the real world, of the facts of political economy, relations of private property, and the real poverty and misery of the masses, whereas Proudhon was "mass-minded", uncovering 'the poverty bred by the movement of private property', that the rest of political economy conceals.<sup>44</sup>

If anything, Marx is giving a qualified defense of Proudhon's *French* language of equality as the negation of private property, 'the language of politics and of thoughtful observation' against "self-

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<sup>43</sup> CW: 4: 39.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. 31-8.

consciousness's" understanding of the unity of the human essence in pure, abstract thought, and the whole driving force of the text, as already seen, consists in a scathing critique of German speculative idealism, whose nonsense had reached its peak in Bauer's obsession with the critical critique of "self-consciousness" and "spirit", the most dangerous enemy of "real humanism".<sup>45</sup> The passage in question, which seems to me nothing more than a passing comment on a specific claim made by Edgar Bauer, is not at all a recognition that the speculative German philosophical language of "self-consciousness" is the source of a practical power, but precisely the opposite. Marx construes it as a speculative metaphysical mystification that Feuerbach had already uprooted, a flight from the real world whose concrete problems it utterly failed to grasp, and the former, as we saw, took the side of the French materialist philosophical and political tradition against the German in this text.

As I have already indicated, it is only in *The German Ideology*, in which German speculative philosophical thought seems to be "translated" into the terms of its functioning as a part of an ideological mechanism of class power and domination, that Marx strongly implies that such conceptual abstractions have practical, political effects. If the ideological constructions of the ruling class thinkers create the appearance that 'the concepts of freedom, equality, etc.', "dominate" the age rather than the bourgeois class itself,<sup>46</sup> the "translation" of this political discourse into the terms of "spirit", the "Idea", the "concept", "self-consciousness", etc., only further obscures the link between ideas and the material conditions of class rule of the bourgeoisie. But as earlier argued, this was only tacitly implied in Marx's contentions, and he failed to explicitly carry out the logic opened up by his analysis of philosophy and ideology as forms of class power.

This is confirmed in Marx's critique of Proudhon in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, perhaps his last joust with philosophy (with the exception of a short section in *The Communist Manifesto* dealing with the German "True" Socialists). It is a critique that is demonstrative of the different theoretical approaches the two thinkers have towards philosophical speculation. Whereas economists develop ideas, principles, and categories in order to explain how the production of wealth takes place in relations of bourgeois production, Proudhon's "metaphysics" of political economy takes these ideas and categories elaborated by the economists as the relations themselves, transforming history into a timeless, logical succession of concepts. The real historical movement of the relations of production (which the economists themselves have denied) is reduced to a purely formal, categorical movement. Thus,

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<sup>45</sup> CW: 4: 7.

<sup>46</sup> CW: 5: 60.

Economic categories are only the theoretical expressions, the abstractions of the social relations of production. M. Proudhon, holding things upside down like a true philosopher, sees in actual relations nothing but the incarnation of these principles, of these categories, which were slumbering - so M. Proudhon the philosopher tells us - in the bosom of the “impersonal reason of humanity”.<sup>47</sup>

In one of the sparse appearances of the term after *The German Ideology*, Proudhon has constructed ‘the edifice of an ideological system by means of the categories of political economy’.<sup>48</sup> Here, we have the familiar theme of philosophy as a speculative metaphysical inversion. In transforming real history into a metaphysical sequence of categories, Proudhon ‘sees things upside down’,<sup>49</sup> and we find also the familiar discourse of “illusion” to characterize such a position.<sup>50</sup> Marx presents Proudhon’s speculative overturning of reality, and denial of real history as a mystified flight from reality. The same is true of Proudhon’s mystification of the dialectic, which is not even a dialectic of opposites and contradictions in pure thought, as in Hegel, but even worse, the purely conceptual opposition between a good and bad side and the attempt to preserve the advantages of the former while eliminating the bad.<sup>51</sup> In this way, Proudhon wants to achieve a “synthesis”, whereas he is a “composite error”. ‘He wants to soar as the man of science above the bourgeois and the proletarians; he is merely the petty bourgeois, continually tossed back and forth between capital and labor’.<sup>52</sup> There is nothing in the text suggesting that, for Marx, in this speculative denial of real history and class struggle and contradictions, there is a source of any practical power, whereas these same criticisms of Proudhon were redeployed by Gramsci in his critique of Croce in order precisely to demonstrate that such speculations were the source of a practical power and form of domination.

Surprisingly, Gramsci does not explicitly refer to *The Communist Manifesto* in his discussion of the concept of translatability, though undoubtedly it was implicitly operative. For here, Marx explicitly expresses the relation between French politics and German philosophy in terms of the metaphor of linguistic translation. Marx’s discussion of the relation reproduces the fundamental tension that traversed *The German Ideology*, between the explicit denunciation and dismissal of philosophy and the elaboration of perspectives that imply that it nevertheless does have practical effects and significance.<sup>53</sup> ‘The Socialist

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<sup>47</sup> CW: 6: 163-5.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. 166.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. 186.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. 197.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. 167-9.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. 178.

<sup>53</sup> This also true of the ideological and superstructural terrain more broadly. Marx writes, for example, that the bourgeoisie has substituted naked and direct exploitation for the earlier forms of exploitation that had been

and Communist literature of France, a literature that originated under the pressure of a bourgeoisie in power, and that was the expression of the struggle against this power', was seized upon by German philosophers. However, 'in contact with German social conditions, this French literature lost all its immediate practical significance, and assumed a purely literary aspect'. Thus, Marx continues,

to the German philosophers of the Eighteenth Century, the demands of the first French Revolution were nothing more than the demands of "Practical Reason" in general, and the utterance of the will of the revolutionary French bourgeoisie signified in their eyes the laws of pure Will, of Will as it was bound to be, of true human Will generally.

This annexation of the French ideas without deserting their philosophical points of view, 'took place in the same way in which a foreign language is appropriated, namely, by translation'. But in this process of linguistic translation, the German *literati* 'wrote their philosophical nonsense' beneath 'the profane French literature'. 'Beneath the French criticisms of the economic foundations of money, they wrote "Alienation of Humanity", and beneath the French criticism of the bourgeois State they wrote "Dethronement of the Category of the General"'. In this way, according to Marx, 'The French Socialist and Communist literature was thus completely emasculated'. The German *literati*, the philosophers and "True" socialists, enclosed themselves 'in the misty realm of philosophical fantasy', their writings, a 'silly echo' of French political criticism, and their thought, 'speculative cobwebs, embroidered with flowers of rhetoric', 'transcendental', in short, nothing but 'sorry "eternal truths" totally divorced from the real world.

Part of what Marx is arguing is that an adequate translation was not really possible, given the backward conditions in Germany in comparison with the French, whose practical and profane criticism presupposed 'the existence of modern bourgeois society, with its corresponding economic conditions of existence, and the political constitution adapted thereto'. And yet, the translation, however inadequate, nevertheless took place, and Marx acknowledges, at the same time that he utterly denounces the German philosophical "nonsense", that it had precise practical political effects in Germany, serving the

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'veiled by religious and political illusions'. This implies a denial not simply of the efficacy of religious and political ideas in buttressing bourgeois class power, but their non-existence for bourgeois rule, further implying that there is no need for a real struggle against ideological forms of domination. Elsewhere, he wrote that for the proletariat, 'Law, morality, religion, are to him so many bourgeois prejudices, behind which lurk in ambush just as many bourgeois interests'. Apparently, now there are actually political and religious ideas elaborated in order to help secure relations of bourgeois exploitation and class power, but their efficacy in doing so is completely denied, given that their status as veils of particular class interests is already transparent to the workers. Analogously, 'The charges against Communism made from a religious, a philosophical, and, generally, from an ideological standpoint, are not deserving of serious examination'. The efficacy of ideology, and consequently the need to confront it, is simultaneously denied and affirmed. Thus, bourgeois culture and education, which is 'for the enormous majority, a mere training to act as a machine', must be rescued 'from the influence of the ruling class', *ibid.* 487, 494-5, 501-3.

reactionary interests of the absolute state against the threatening rise of the bourgeoisie, as well as the reactionary interests of the German petty-bourgeois class, the preservation of which ‘is to preserve the existing state of things in Germany’.

Furthermore, one would think that their conceptual abstractions perform a crucial role in enabling the German philosophers and intellectuals to perform this conservative and reactionary function of maintaining the German status quo. In the face of the threatening rise of the German bourgeoisie and a modern revolutionary proletariat, the “True socialists” appear ‘to kill these two birds with one stone’. They see themselves as detached, and their ideas cease to ‘express the struggle of one class with another’. The German philosopher ‘felt conscious of having overcome “French one-sidedness” and of representing, not true requirements, but the requirements of Truth; not the interests of the proletariat, but the interests of Human Nature, of Man in general, who belongs to no class, has no reality, who exists only in the misty realm of philosophical fantasy’. In short, German Socialism ‘went to the extreme length of directly opposing the “brutally destructive” tendency of Communism, and of proclaiming its supreme and impartial contempt of all class struggles’.<sup>54</sup>

It would seem then, that their abstract philosophical and conceptual discourse is not, after all, pure “nonsense” and “philosophical fantasy”, the loss of any “practical significance”, but rather, precisely in virtue of its abstract and speculative vagueness, the source of a practical, conservative and reactionary historical and political function in Germany. The philosophical projection of general images of universality, of “Man in general”, pure “Truth”, and transcendent impartiality, in place of the real historical struggles between classes and their conflicting interests, was the core of the ideological mechanism of class domination he had sketched in *The German Ideology*, in which particular class interests are given the ideal form of universality. If such ideas perform practical political functions, then the fact that they are speculative mystifications of the concrete world of social conflict and struggle is secondary. As is evident, Gramsci explicitly took over these arguments about “Human Nature” and “Man in general” in Q 4, 45, and Q 7, 35, and immediately “translated” them into their practical political effects in organizing human masses and stimulating them to concrete action. Such ideas may be tantamount to the creation of a utopia, but that does not mean they are devoid of philosophical value, for they have a political value, and every politics is implicitly a philosophy.

Similarly, in the immediately following section of the Manifesto, Proudhon’s *Philosophy of Poverty*, which Marx had ruthlessly denounced as “illusion” and “fiction” earlier that year (1847), is explicitly linked to conservative bourgeois tendencies that seek to mollify and palliate the egregious

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<sup>54</sup> CW: 6: 510-3.

conditions of the working class precisely in order ‘to secure the continued existence of bourgeois society’, ‘without the struggles and dangers necessarily resulting’ from it, without any ‘revolutionary and disintegrating elements’.<sup>55</sup> Once again, the logic of this type of analysis, which could be seen as a prescient critique of contemporary forms of reformism, was explicitly drawn out by Gramsci when he linked Croce’s thought to conservative, moderate, and reformist tendencies that seek to absorb, assimilate, and ultimately nullify the “bad”, i.e. negative revolutionary element in history.

The above analysis of the concept of “translatability” between German philosophy and French politics is demonstrative of the fundamental fissure between Marx’s and Gramsci’s understandings of the comparison, and more deeply, of their profoundly different approaches to understanding philosophy. That the latter could attribute to Marx the achievement of radically displacing the traditional concept of philosophy onto the terrain of social conflict and class power, now to be understood in terms of its practical and effective functioning within it, is due to the fact that Gramsci, in re-reading the famous comparison in Marx’s texts, explicitly drew out the logic that was implicit in Marx’s own arguments. And Gramsci could do so because he had consistently eschewed any “negative” conception of ideology, instead reinterpreting the idea of translatability within the framework of a positive, yet critical, concept of ideology derived from his unique fusion of the 1859 Preface and the second thesis on Feuerbach. It was this original framework that enabled Gramsci to consistently understand the terrain of social consciousness, and especially philosophy, in terms of their degrees of practical political effects within relations of social power and conflict.

Although a misreading of Marx’s own thinking, Gramsci was able, in this way, to supersede the fundamental tension traversing, as we can now see, not only the critique in *The German Ideology* and the statements in the 1859 Preface, but also other of his works from the 1840’s, namely, that between what Callinicos refers to as an “epistemological” and “pragmatic” understanding of ideology, and by extension, philosophy. In the former, ‘ideology is conceived as a set of false beliefs, constituted by a dual relation, first, to the reality of which it is an inverted reflection, and, secondly, to the true, scientific knowledge of that reality’, whereas the second is an understanding of ideologies as forms of institutionalization and solidification of class power, without reference to the truth-value of the ideological discourses.<sup>56</sup> If ideologies have practical functions in relations of class struggle and domination, ‘then the question of the truth or falsity of ideologies is beside the point’.<sup>57</sup> Gramsci takes the practical political functions of

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid. 513-4.

<sup>56</sup> Callinicos 1985, 128-9.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. 135. Eagleton has similarly highlighted the equivocation, in Marx’s work, ‘between ideology as illusion, and ideology as the intellectual armory of a social class’, i.e. the ‘conflict between the epistemological and political meanings of the term. In the second sense of the word, what matters is not the character of the beliefs in

ideological and philosophical discourses as his analytical point of departure, *identifying* these with truth and knowledge and critically distinguishing them from one another by degrees, such that there cannot be any tension or contradiction between any “epistemological” or “pragmatic” conception, the traditional concepts of truth and knowledge being completely eschewed, as the epistemological/gnoseological and pragmatic dimensions, knowledge and political praxis, are made *the same thing*.<sup>58</sup>

### 6.3.3 Translatability: the positive dimension

The above analysis also further confirms the conclusion reached at the end of the previous chapter, namely, that Marx, from the *Theses* onward, was unable to think about philosophy outside of the understanding of it as a hopelessly detached, elitist intellectual and theoretical enterprise unserviceable to working class and communist politics, a conservative and even reactionary movement confined to the petty bourgeois class of literati, and whose primary basis lay in the backward and anachronistic conditions of Germany. The second and eleventh theses were both understood by Marx as a mutually exclusive opposition between the purely theoretical, scholastic, and interpretive activity of philosophy, and the truth that is concretely developed and realized through the class struggle and revolutionary praxis of the proletariat, in short, the practical revolutionary self-emancipation of the proletariat as the decisive repudiation of philosophy *tout court*. In other words, Marx did not share Gramsci’s understanding of the notion of translatability either at the critical, destructive level, or the positive level of critical re-appropriation and transformation, i.e. the two key dimensions of the idea identified earlier.

In this sense, Croce’s interpretation of Marx’s eleventh thesis as the demand for the replacement of all philosophy with the revolutionary political praxis of the proletariat was more accurate than Gramsci’s assertion that it represented the demand ‘that philosophy must become “politics” or “practice” in order for it to continue to be philosophy’.<sup>59</sup> Nor is there any evidence to substantiate Gramsci’s claim that Hegel’s *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* or *The Philosophy of History*, in which the latter drew the comparison between French revolutionary politics and German classical philosophy, were important ‘as the “source” of Marx’s view, expressed in the *Theses on Feuerbach*, that the philosophers have explained the world and the point now is to change it’, i.e. ‘that philosophy must become “politics” or

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question, but their function . . . there is thus no reason why these beliefs should necessarily be false in themselves’, Eagleton 1991, 90.

<sup>58</sup> Frosini 2009, 34.

<sup>59</sup> Q 8, 208, 1066.



“practice” in order for it to continue to be philosophy. The “source”, then, of the theory of the unity of theory and practice’.<sup>60</sup> Rather than a philosophical idea from Hegel, as we have seen, it was through his concrete experiences of the labor movement, as well as actual events and struggles occurring at the time that demonstrated to Marx the capacity of workers to liberate themselves, both practically and theoretically, transforming themselves and their thinking at the same time that they revolutionize existing circumstances, i.e. the *revolutionäre Praxis* of the proletariat as the coincidence of interpreting and changing, theory and practice, knowledge and action.<sup>61</sup>

It is only in the “Introduction” that Gramsci would have found evidence, in Marx himself, for the idea ‘that philosophy must become “politics” or “practice” in order for it to continue to be philosophy’. Indeed, it is highly likely that the former took this text as a source of inspiration for his own notion that philosophy, rather than being wholly abandoned, should be fundamentally reformulated as a mass politics, i.e. the synthesis of German philosophy and French politics, the positive “translation” and reformulation of classical German philosophy into a fundamentally new philosophy of praxis in conjunction with Marx’s eleventh thesis. Thus, Gramsci wrote that the philosophy of praxis

must be elevated to the level of creating a new integral culture, having the mass characteristic of the Protestant Reformation and the French Enlightenment at the same time as having the classicism of Greek and Italian Renaissance culture: in the words of Carducci, a culture which synthesizes Maximilien Robespierre and Immanuel Kant, politics and philosophy in a dialectical unity intrinsic to a social group that is not just French or German but European and world-wide.<sup>62</sup>

As we have seen, at the time of the “Introduction”, Marx really had grasped his intellectual enterprise as one of radically reforming philosophy on an “anti-scholastic” basis, as a type of synthesis of the German “head” and the French “heart”, German philosophical idealism and French politics, theory and practice, the spiritual weapons of philosophy and the material weapons of the proletariat.

Furthermore, given the terminological parallels between the “Introduction” and the *Theses* that Marx borrowed directly from Feuerbach, e.g. ‘The *task of history*, therefore, once the *world beyond the truth* has disappeared, is to establish the *truth of this world*’ [the *Jenseits/Diesseits* binary], the need for philosophy to turn towards criticism of the “earth”, i.e. *politics*,<sup>63</sup> it would hardly be surprising (it seems nearly certain in my opinion) if Gramsci read the “Introduction” in congruence with the *Theses*, unaware

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<sup>60</sup> Q 8, 208, 1066.

<sup>61</sup> In this sense, I agree with Labica that the category of revolutionary praxis signaled in the *Theses* was developed outside of the frame of philosophy, Labica 1990, 174.

<sup>62</sup> Q 10, I, 11, 1233.

<sup>63</sup> CW: 3: 176.

of the vast fissure that separates the two texts.<sup>64</sup> In this way, it is not a major leap for Gramsci to arrive at the idea that in the *Theses*, Marx is calling for a radical reconstitution of philosophy as practical and political, whose truth would be “this-worldly”, as opposed to “other-worldly”, and which seeks to be a theory and practice of its own “worldly” or “earthly” basis, in other words a philosophy of praxis in the “worldly” and “profane” sense, this latter term also appearing in the “Introduction” in addition to *The Poverty of Philosophy*.<sup>65</sup> Such parallels hardly seem coincidental.

#### 6.4 From Marx’s *diesseitigkeit* to Gramsci’s *terrestrità assoluta*

There is nevertheless, a substantial convergence between Gramsci’s reinterpretation of the *Theses* as the nucleus of a philosophy of praxis conceived as an “absolute immanence”, an “absolute worldliness and earthliness” of thought, and Marx’s own concept of revolutionary praxis presented in the same text and subsequently developed in other works, in which a coherent revolutionary theory can only emerge and develop within the framework of the class struggle itself, and more particularly, in an integral link with the needs, strivings, and consciousness of the masses that constitutes its organic basis.

As previously expounded, the category of *revolutionary practice*, in which there is a ‘coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-change’, indicates that in the course of the political struggle to transform society, the masses transform themselves, acquire consciousness both of their circumstances and of themselves as revolutionary agents, and consequently, become fit for founding a new social formation. It is revolutionary “practical-critical” activity, in which the conflicts and contradictions constitutive of the social world are both understood in theory and practically uprooted, ‘annihilated theoretically and practically’.<sup>66</sup> It is therefore that revolutionary theory that practically and politically demonstrates its truth, i.e. its reality and power, and “this worldliness” on the terrain of struggle. In short, theoretical and practical activity, interpreting and changing, knowing and practically transforming, are fused together in a total or integral human activity - revolutionary, “practical-critical”, activity, the theoretical substratum of the political conception of communism as the self-emancipation of the proletariat that Marx made explicit in *The German Ideology*.

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<sup>64</sup> In the former, as Löwy argues, ‘the activity is on the part of philosophical criticism, which penetrates, takes hold of the masses’, whereas in the latter we find the theoretical foundation for which, ‘it is the masses themselves who, by their revolutionary activity, attain consciousness, become communists, and appropriate the theory for themselves’, Löwy 2005, 59.

<sup>65</sup> CW: 3: 175.

<sup>66</sup> CW: 5: 4.

There, it was only through active participation in the class struggle that the workers could practically come to grips with the world around them, break free from ruling class ideological constructions, and acquire consciousness of themselves as a class, along with their corresponding practical tasks, thereby becoming fit for power. The communist theoreticians had to situate their ideas within the terrain of struggle, assisting the workers in strengthening and clarifying the communist consciousness that the workers were already in the process of developing through their own practice. Thus, rather than dictating truths and principles to the working masses from a standpoint outside the struggle, communist intellectuals had to base their thought on the needs, strivings, and consciousness of the workers as these developed and manifested themselves in the struggle in course, further elucidating the fundamental class antagonism between it and the bourgeoisie. According to this perspective, there is a dynamic reciprocal interaction between the proletariat and communist theoreticians, the former constituting the ground for the latter, at the same time that the latter strengthen and reinforce the former, thereby accelerating the struggle underway.

This theoretical conception of proletarian self-liberation through revolutionary practice, as a dynamic process of knowing and understanding practically and politically in the class struggle, and in which there is a complementary relation of coordination and exchange between masses and intellectuals, was not in fact, a mere transient moment in Marx's intellectual evolution, but on the contrary, as Löwy contends, remained a fundamental part of his political thought until his death.<sup>67</sup> Marx further deepened this perspective in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, by providing a more detailed account of the actual process through which the proletariat politically organizes and constitutes itself as a class, an investigation moreover, that finds its theoretical foundation in a coherent conception of the ensemble of social relations as a set of social relations of production, an idea that, as previously noted, Gramsci inherited. As a consequence, Marx no longer confusingly describes the proletariat as a class which has no particular class interests to assert against a ruling class, or as having a "universal character". Instead, the proletariat is regarded as a determinate class formed within a historically specific structure of production relations.

Social relations of bourgeois production have created for the working masses 'a common situation, common interests'. In this sense, 'this mass is thus already a class as against capital, but not yet for itself'. It is only through struggle that 'this mass becomes united, and constitutes itself as a class for itself. The interests it defends become class interests', and this 'struggle of class against class is a political struggle'. The different phases and levels of the class struggle constitute a learning process for the workers, beginning with elementary forms of struggle within the process of production. They go on strike

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<sup>67</sup> Löwy 2005, 149.

against their employers to maintain wages, form combinations and trade unions. Through this process the workers overcome their mutual competition with one another, and gain a sense of their common interests as a class against capital:

If the first aim of resistance was merely the maintenance of wages, combinations, at first isolated, constitute themselves into groups as the capitalists in their turn unite for the purpose of repression, and in the face of always united capital, the maintenance of the association becomes more necessary to them than their wages . . . In this struggle - a veritable civil war - all the elements necessary for a coming battle unite and develop. Once it has reached this point, association takes on a political character.<sup>68</sup>

This is why Marx defends the more elementary and limited struggles of the workers, such as strikes and combinations, against the economists, the utopian socialists, and Proudhon, recognizing in them the necessary terrain on which workers elevate their understanding of their position within the structure of production relations, their common class interests against the capitalists, and the necessity of a violent revolutionary political struggle of class against class. The economic and social struggle is inseparably intertwined with political struggle: ‘The organization of these strikes, combinations, and *trade unions* went on simultaneously with the political struggles of the workers’, and Mays says that the formation of combinations is itself a form of engaging in politics.<sup>69</sup> There is a reciprocal, mutually reinforcing dynamic between the economic and political struggle, in which the workers ascend to greater and greater levels of consciousness and organization.

The role of the communists, who are the theoreticians of the proletarian class, consists in becoming the “mouthpiece” for the real historical class struggle underway. The utopian socialist theoreticians, ‘who, to meet the wants of the oppressed classes, improvise systems and go in search of a regenerating science’, ‘see in poverty nothing but poverty, without seeing in it the revolutionary, subversive side’. This failure to grasp the practical and active emancipative capacities of the workers made sense so long as the proletarian struggle was still in its infancy, and thus, when it had not yet assumed clearer outlines as a political confrontation of class against class. But as the historical struggle of the proletariat becomes more acute, conscious, and combative, the communist theoreticians no longer need to construct utopian systems in their minds. ‘They have only to take note of what is happening before their eyes and to become its mouthpiece’. In this way, a communist theoretical “science” emerges which, grasping the active, revolutionary capacities of the proletariat, associates ‘itself consciously with

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<sup>68</sup> CW: 6: 210-1.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. 210.

it', as a theory 'which is produced by the historical movement', and sees itself as an element within the historic struggle of the proletariat. As a consequence, communist theory 'has ceased to be doctrinaire and has become revolutionary'.<sup>70</sup>

The revolutionary scientific theory of the communists is sharply counterposed to the doctrinaire preaching of the utopian socialists from a transcendent position outside of the class struggle, as well as to Marx's earlier 1843-44 conception of the lightning of the thought of philosophers and intellectuals seizing a passive mass. The revolutionary theory of the communists, as Löwy contends, 'is a *practical-critical activity* in the sense of the *Theses on Feuerbach*: produced on the basis of an historical practice it makes itself the critical, coherent and consistent expression of this practice and consciously associates itself therewith, as instrument and guide for revolutionary action'.<sup>71</sup> This implies that the truth, that is the reality and power, or "this-worldliness" of the theory of the communists is not necessary, but contingent, being dependent on the degree to which they actually succeed in identifying themselves with the historical strivings of the proletarians, coherently and effectively elaborating their needs and interests in the course of struggle. It implies, in other words, a distinctive mode of knowing and understanding practically and politically from a particular standpoint *within* the struggle itself, i.e. from the standpoint of the historical, economic, social, and political praxis of the proletariat that constitutes the foundation of communist theory, and which the latter in turn seeks to render more coherent, conscious, and efficient. Analogously, the truth-power of the thinking of the masses is parasitic upon the degree to which they succeed in acquiring consciousness, organize themselves politically, and struggle to practically and effectively assert their common class interests against those of the capitalists. It is likewise a *practical-critical activity* in the sense of the *Theses*, integrally linked with the practical-critical activity of the communist theoreticians. This perspective implies, as Frosini articulates, that

Revolutionary communism will find its truth only by thinking itself as a *part in struggle*, assuming through and through that which Antonio Labriola would later happily define the "visual angle of the proletariat". *Knowing as a part in struggle*: the "truth-power" of critical communism lies in this peculiar "knowing".<sup>72</sup>

The capacity for self-organization, self-transformation, and self-education of the workers through struggle, and the pivotal role of the communists in reinforcing and expressing the independent praxis of the workers, were reaffirmed and further elaborated in *The Communist Manifesto*. As in *The Poverty of*

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid. 177-8.

<sup>71</sup> Löwy 2005, 139.

<sup>72</sup> Frosini 2009, 104.

*Philosophy*, the workers must undergo a process of self-growth in their struggle with the bourgeoisie, from its incipient stages, in which the laborers ‘still form an incoherent mass’, ‘broken up by their mutual competition’, and whose struggles are localized in a given factory or industry, they progress to the formation of combinations and trade unions, ‘they found permanent associations’, and the struggle increasingly assumes the form of ‘collisions between two classes’, that is a genuine political struggle, in which the workers must constitute themselves as a political party.<sup>73</sup>

The theoretical and practical activity of the communists must find its basis in the struggles of the workers, theorizing the effective relations of class struggle. ‘The theoretical conclusions of the Communists are in no way based on ideas or principles that have been invented, or discovered, by this or that would-be universal reformer. They merely express, in general terms, actual relations springing from an existing class struggle, from a historical movement going on under our very eyes’, or as he put it elsewhere, ‘they never cease, for a single instant, to instill into the working class the clearest possible recognition of the hostile antagonism between the bourgeoisie and proletariat’.<sup>74</sup> They do so, moreover, from the standpoint of the interests of the proletariat, including both its momentary and immediate interests and its more vital long-term needs and interests: “The Communists fight for the attainment of the immediate aims, for the enforcement of the momentary interests of the working class; but in the movement of the present, they also represent and take care of the future of that movement’.<sup>75</sup> Thus, the small section of “bourgeois ideologists” who, in periods of acute political and revolutionary crisis, ‘joins the revolutionary class’, only do so because they have adopted the “standpoint” of the proletariat, and from this particular standpoint, ‘have raised themselves to the level of comprehending theoretically the historical movement as a whole’, just as the other social classes that succeed in transferring themselves to the proletariat, have deserted ‘their own standpoint to place themselves at that of the proletariat’.<sup>76</sup>

Hence, in this perspective, the activity of the Communist Party, as Löwy correctly argues, ‘must be based precisely upon the historical *Selbsttätigkeit* (self-activity or initiative) of the proletariat, upon its gradual organization as a class. It has to integrate itself in the workers’ political movement in order to guide that movement towards revolutionary action’.<sup>77</sup> ‘The Communists’, as Marx explains,

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<sup>73</sup> CW: 6: 492-3.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. 519.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid. 498, 518.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid. 494. As Löwy emphasizes, the problem of the class transition of bourgeois intellectuals to the proletariat and communism is not presented ‘in terms of an *alliance between two groups* - those who think and those who suffer - as he did in 1843, but in terms of *some individuals joining the revolutionary class*’, Löwy 2005, 140.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. 142.

are on the one hand, practically, the most advanced and resolute section of the working-class parties of every country, that section which pushes forward all others; on the other hand, theoretically, they have over the great mass of the proletariat the advantage of clearly understanding the line of march, the conditions, and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement.<sup>78</sup>

The theoretical and practical activity of the communists takes place within the working class movement, serving to clarify and elaborate the broader interests of the proletarian movement as a whole on the basis of its more immediate and momentary interests. 'In the various stages of development which the struggle of the working class against the bourgeoisie has to pass through, they always and every represent the interests of the movement as a whole'.<sup>79</sup> In short, the communists represent the theoretical and practical vanguard of the international proletarian movement - 'the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interests of the immense majority'.<sup>80</sup>

This concept of knowing and understanding politically on the basis of the class struggle is also true in situations of defeat. In *The Class Struggles in France*, in which Marx analyzed the political struggles in France in 1848-49,<sup>81</sup> the French workers were immersed in a specific field of social, political, and ideological relations. They had reveled in the bourgeois republican slogans of *liberté, égalité, and fraternité*, through which the bourgeoisie had cemented its rule in the aftermath of the February revolt, binding together a political class bloc of forces under its control. The proletarians had been duped into believing that 'the *rule of the bourgeoisie* was abolished with the introduction of the republic', caught up in the imaginary images of class unity and harmony embodied in the ideological discourses of fraternity, universal fraternization and brotherhood.<sup>82</sup> The process through which the French workers broke away from bourgeois republican ideologies, thereby elevating their consciousness, only occurred via the suffering of the violent and bloody defeat of June 1848, a struggle into which the proletariat had been deliberately provoked by their antagonists. 'The veil that shrouded the republic was torn asunder' in the context of violent struggle and defeat, as a result of which the limits of the bourgeois republic had been

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<sup>78</sup> CW: 6: 497.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid. 495.

<sup>81</sup> Perhaps not surprisingly, when Marx comes to consider a concrete political situation, many of the insights he developed in *The German Ideology*, when he had been forced to consider the nexus between power and ideas, resurface in this analysis, e.g. the specific effects and mode of functioning of ideologies within relations of power and struggle, the agents - i.e. ideologists who perform the role of elaborating these ideas, the material apparatuses through which ideologies are diffused, enabling a class or section of a class to consolidate a political bloc of social alliances, thereby isolating other social groups, CW: 10: 49-51, 72, 74, 76, 110.

<sup>82</sup> CW: 10: 57-8.

revealed, and the workers became conscious of the need for a genuine revolutionary struggle to overthrow the bourgeoisie. They had, practically and politically in the course of an unsuccessful struggle, arrived at a “truth”. Accordingly, Marx judged that ‘The Parisian workers had learned in the bloody school of June 1848’.<sup>83</sup>

From this angle, we can understand why he wrote in September 1850: ‘we say to the workers: You have 15, 20, 50 years of civil war to go through in order to alter the situation and to train yourselves for the exercise of power’.<sup>84</sup> The process of learning, knowing, and coming to understand the world practically and politically in the course of struggle, as Marx acknowledges, may be a long drawn-out affair, complicated by partial defeats and momentary victories, in which a step forward in one domain may be a step backward in another. The political constitution of truth and knowledge is contingent, subject to the shifting dynamics that characterize a concrete political situation or conjuncture, as well as longer-term trends and cycles of struggle. ‘The revolution’ Marx argued, will not be ‘the result of an effort of *will*’, but rather, can only be ‘the product of realities of the situation’.<sup>85</sup>

Although Marx did not explicitly develop a concept of immanence, Gramsci’s reformulation of Marx’s thesis of the unity of theory and practice into the terms of an “absolute immanence”, or an “absolute worldliness or earthliness” of thought, represents a further development and enrichment of the latter’s notion of the “worldliness” of thought that demonstrates its truth, i.e. reality and power, in practice. By re-reading the *Theses* through the lens of Labriola, Gramsci was able to make much more explicit than Marx did, the profound link between truth and partiality already implicit in some of Marx’s own formulations in the 1840’s. If the practical efficacy of the theory of the communists depends upon their ability to become the “mouthpiece” of the real historical movement, of the effective relations of class struggle, and of the interests and strivings of the proletariat within it, then it is not a theory and practice, or revolutionary practical-critical activity of the strife and contradictions of the “earthly” world in some general sense, but more precisely, a mode of theorizing and knowing practically and politically as an element within the antagonistic field it seeks to grasp, from the critical standpoint of the thought, needs, and interests of the workers.

Gramsci made this explicit in his interpretation of the fourth thesis on Feuerbach. The concept of the unity of theory and practice in the *Theses* becomes the actual partial standpoint, or “visual angle” from which Marxist theory grasps both itself as a mode of theorizing and knowing from a specific position and

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid. 104.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid. 626.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.



point of view inside the struggle, as well as the theoretical discourses and representations of its antagonists. On this point, Frosini writes that, if Marxism has always been concerned, in one way or another, with the relation between understanding and changing, theoretical critique and politics,

only with Gramsci does this relation become the *point of view* from which one might explain both Marxism and any other philosophy. The urgency with which Gramsci insists in the *Prison Notebooks* on the “unity of theory and practice” cannot be understood as a “theoretical” standpoint (in the sense attributed to “theory” in the “Theses on Feuerbach”), but it must be rightly interpreted as the displacement of philosophy onto a new terrain, a terrain in which thought is always, structurally, a standpoint involved in a network of forces and theoretical-practical relations; the standpoint is conditioned by the network and, in turn, reacts upon it.<sup>86</sup>

Undoubtedly, Gramsci went well beyond Marx in explicitly fusing the concept of the unity of theory and practice with the notion of partiality that has already been explored, elevating this “perspectival” dimension to a gnoseological, political, and philosophical paradigm, and making it the key criterion according to which to grasp both the specificity of Marxism and all other thought. But Frosini does not explain the purported chasm with the sense of “theory” in the *Theses*. Despite Gramsci’s problematic (not necessarily in itself, but insofar as it is radically at odds with Marx’s own understanding of his thought) interpretation of the eleventh thesis as a call for the critical re-appropriation and transformation of philosophy, he nevertheless rightly grasped that the political category of praxis genuinely signaled a fundamental and radical displacement of the traditional understanding of the status of theory (*theoria*), i.e. of truth, knowledge, and understanding, in which theory loses its etymological sense of passive contemplation, theory now understood as an eminently practical and active mode of knowing and coming to understand the world politically, within the terms of its practical reality and power. It is revolutionary, “practical-critical” activity, in which a critical and coherent knowledge of the social world with the capacity to radically transform it, can only emerge out of the dynamic, reciprocal interaction between the proletariat and communist theoreticians, the former constituting the ground for the latter, at the same time that the latter strengthen and reinforce the former, thereby accelerating the struggle underway.

Gramsci’s understanding of the unity of theory and practice as an absolute immanence further develops this idea within the framework of a much more complex and sophisticated understanding of the dynamic interplay between the multifarious grades or levels of social consciousness, i.e. the complex,

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<sup>86</sup> Frosini 2009b, 674.

contradictory, and discordant ensemble of the superstructures or ideological forms, and with a much greater stress on the contingent nature of knowing within a concrete political situation, or conjuncture. The absolute worldliness or immanence of theory in the proletarian practices that form its conditions of emergence, and which it seeks to critically understand in order to transform, in other words, critically adopting the standpoint of the masses in order to elevate their consciousness to a higher level, requires that the organic working class intellectuals come to terms with the variegated ideological layers that have left deposits in popular consciousness, since a critically coherent conception of the world can only emerge out of the incoherence of common sense. And the latter is itself a composite of various religious, scientific, philosophical, linguistic, political, etc. sedimentations, the reflection in mass consciousness of the complexity and diversity of the ideological complex in which they find themselves, and which is in turn a function of the “non-contemporaneity” of the concrete present explored in Chapter Three.

This perspective helps to account for the fractured, disjointed, and inconsistent character of the conceptions of the masses. Any “present”, or historically specific ensemble of social relations, is not simply contradictory in a synchronic sense, but also diachronically, as residues and elements from the past get deposited in the present, thus forming complex sedimentations in the present that are simultaneously relics of the past. This heterogeneous and contradictory conglomeration, or composite, of historical traces gets refracted throughout the whole social body, the whole ensemble of social relations, both across and within social groups and classes, and therefore, within individuals and individual consciousness. The greater coherence and thus, historical efficacy and practical power of the philosophy of praxis depends on the extent to which it grasps this infinity of historical traces deposited in the determinate ensemble of social relations in which it finds itself, as an integral element of the struggle to transform and elevate the contradictory and disjointed conceptions of the world of the masses into a coherent and therefore, more historically effective form with a greater capacity for transformative historical agency, in this way overcoming the passivity induced by the incoherence of common sense.

This is quite different from Marx’s conception of learning, understanding, and knowing within the class struggle. As is apparent from the previous examinations of *The German Ideology*, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, and *The Communist Manifesto*, he had a tendency to present the process through which workers know and acquire consciousness through struggle as a somewhat linear and evolutionary one, in which workers gradually ascend to increasingly higher forms of consciousness. Through strikes and combinations workers gradually become conscious of their common class interests, whereupon they constitute themselves politically as a class against capital. In the course of this struggle the workers overcome ruling class ideologies and become fit for power.

In contrast, Gramsci's understanding of the dynamics of understanding, theorizing, and knowing practically and politically in the course of struggle is devoid of the problematic teleological implications underlying these types of formulations by Marx. This is connected, among other things, to the way in which Gramsci re-reads Marx in conjunction with Machiavelli. As explicated in Chapter Two, Gramsci sees in Machiavelli, the prototype of a philosopher of praxis, who rejected all 'transcendental or immanent (in the metaphysical sense) elements', by basing his thought on the 'concrete action of men' in "effective reality", i.e. the concrete terrain of 'a relation of forces in continuous movement and change of equilibrium'. He provided a model for an active and partial form of theorizing and knowing within a determinate political situation, in order to intervene in, and shift the existing relation of forces. Rather than speculatively prefiguring an ideal state of affairs, Machiavelli rethought the teleological element of "necessity", or "what must be" departing from the specific field of relations of force that make up the concrete political conjuncture:

If one applies one's will to the creation of a new equilibrium among the forces which really exist and are operative - basing oneself on the particular force which one believes to be progressive and strengthening it to help it to victory - one still moves on the terrain of effective reality, but does so in order to dominate and transcend it (or to contribute to this). What "must be" is therefore concrete; indeed it is the only realistic and historicist interpretation of reality, it alone is history in the making and philosophy in the making, it alone is politics.<sup>87</sup>

Historical "necessity" is concrete and contingent, being subject to the particular dynamics of a political situation, of the relation of forces that make up effective reality. Thus, history cannot be schematized according to a rigid system or fixed model. Arguing against Bukharin's reduction of history to a set of sociological and evolutionary laws, which for Gramsci, is tantamount to the 'attempt to provide a schematic description and classification of historical and political facts, according to criteria built up on the model of natural science', the latter says that 'The experience on which the philosophy of praxis is based cannot be schematized; it is history in all its infinite variety and multiplicity, whose study can give rise to "philology"', that is 'the methodological expression of the importance of ascertaining particular facts in their unique and unrepeatable individuality'. The more general "laws" of history can only be laws of tendency, rather than metaphysical, deterministic, causal, or evolutionary ones.<sup>88</sup>

This is why Gramsci attributes a philosophical significance to David Ricardo. In a note entitled "Introduction to the study of philosophy. Speculative immanence and historicist or realist immanence",

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<sup>87</sup> Q 13, 16, 1578.

<sup>88</sup> Q 11, 25, 1428-9, Q 11, 26, 1431-2.

Gramsci claims that Ricardo's discovery of the "law of tendency" in economics has a more profound, gnoseological significance, because it implies 'a new "immanence", a new conception of "necessity"'. Rather than deterministic and naturalistic metaphysical laws, historical laws are tendential in the sense of being circumscribed and contingent, the scope of their operative validity being limited by the relation of forces that characterize a "determinate market". This latter consists in a "determined relation of social forces in a determined structure of the productive apparatus" that is guaranteed by a determined juridical superstructure'. Historical necessity, or "regularity" is relative, being conditioned by the specific relation of forces that determine a historically specific market.<sup>89</sup> The legality or "autonomism" of history, which 'is nothing other than rationality' is therefore, a contingent and relative one. Hegel's speculative concept of immanence of the rational in the real, with the aid of Ricardo's hypothetical method of "let us suppose that", and "laws of tendency", is purified of its metaphysical apparatus and brought to the concrete terrain of history.<sup>90</sup> The rational is not immanent in the real in the speculative idealist sense that truth or reason is immanent in reality as its necessary metaphysical expression. Instead, necessity, laws, rationality, and truth are rethought as contingent products of a historically determinate relation of forces.

Gramsci's proposals concerning Ricardo's philosophical importance remained only tentative and exploratory. However, their implications for Gramsci's attempt to rethink Marxism as an absolute immanence are clear enough, particularly when considered in connection with the re-reading of Machiavelli. Theorizing and knowing practically and politically from the specific standpoint, or visual angle, of a determinate social class on the terrain of effective reality, that is within a dynamic network of antagonistic social, political, and ideological forces, requires knowing the historically unique and original facts that go to make up the particular political situation. For the philosophy of praxis to be an immanent critique of the "bizarrely composed" elements of common sense, it must have a critical knowledge of the bizarrely composed elements that constitute the unique and original "present", and which have left sediments and layers in popular consciousness. In this way, the philosophy of praxis represents an absolutely immanent, or this-worldly mode of knowing from the specific point of view of the working masses, and this, on the basis of the particular contingent facts and elements that form a unique historical and political conjuncture or situation, and which have shaped the experience and thought of the masses. In this sense, Gramsci wrote,

With the extension of mass parties and their organic coalescence with the intimate (economic-productive) life of the masses themselves, the process whereby popular feeling is standardized ceases to be mechanical and casual (that is produced by the conditioning of environmental factors

<sup>89</sup> Q 10, II, 9, 1246-8, Q 8, 128, 1018-9, Q 11, 52, 1477-9.

<sup>90</sup> Q 10, II, 9, 1247, Q 10, II, 8, 1246.

and the like) and becomes conscious and critical. Knowledge and a judgment of the importance of this feeling on the part of the leaders is no longer the product of hunches backed up by the identification of statistical laws, which leaders then translate into ideas and words-as-force. (This is the rational and intellectual way and is all too often fallacious). Rather it is acquired by the collective organism through “active and conscious co-participation”, through “compassionality”, through experience of immediate particulars, through a system which one could call “living philology”. In this way a close link is formed between great mass, party, and leading group; and the whole complex, thus articulated, can move together as “collective-man”.<sup>91</sup>

As Marx had argued, the emergence of a critical and coherent knowledge and understanding of the world on a mass scale can only occur within the framework of a practical movement, on the basis of a political struggle in the course of which the masses transform themselves and their consciousness, and in which the communist theoreticians must place themselves inside this mass struggle, basing themselves on the workers’ practical consciousness in order to coherently elaborate and articulate their needs and interests, in this way maximizing the transformative revolutionary potential of the exploited masses. But this worldly process of knowing theoretically and practically can only occur in the full openness, contingency, and dynamism that characterizes concrete politics and the class struggle, as is implicit, for example, in Marx’s analyses of a specific political situation in *The Class Struggles in France*, and in his belief that the workers may have to endure a protracted struggle over the case of many years before they can become fit for rule. Gramsci’s re-elaboration of Marx’s thesis of the this-worldliness of a theory that practically and politically demonstrates itself in the course of struggle into the terms of an absolute immanence or worldliness of thought, forcefully and explicitly develops the necessarily partial and contingent nature of this process against the backdrop of a sophisticated understanding of the complexity of the terrain of social consciousness, and of the practical weight that ideological and philosophical constructions may have on the struggle. These elements, combined with the distinctive way in which Gramsci elaborates the unity of theory and practice in terms of an immanent critique of common sense, and the struggle for greater coherence and the capacity to act in a politically effective way, thereby maximizing the truth and practical power of Marxism, represent an enrichment of Marx’s own conception of the this-worldliness of revolutionary praxis.

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<sup>91</sup> Q 11, 25, 1430,

## Conclusion

On the basis of this study, it is clear why Marx (somewhat understandably in my opinion) could not deliver that which Gramsci had imputed to him, namely, a conception that ruthlessly and consistently stressed the practical power of ideological forms of consciousness, especially philosophy, on one hand, and on the other, an alternative understanding of a philosophy rooted in a democratic, mass-based proletarian revolutionary politics. Taking the left-Hegelians as his principal reference point, Marx invariably came to see philosophy as a fundamentally elitist enterprise confined to a small coterie of intellectuals, whose conceptual and theoretical abstractions were totally divorced from the concrete social realities of politics, working class struggle, and their real historical foundations in the class antagonisms arising from the economic structure. Hence, it is not surprising that Marx could simultaneously produce a brilliant and original analysis of the practical power and efficacy of ideological and philosophical constructions within relations of class power, and yet repeatedly dismiss them as illusory detachments explicable from the empirical and scientific foundation of the mode of production. It is perhaps a testament to the sheer disappointment experienced by Marx, who had earlier placed his faith in the practical transformative capacities of philosophy in the struggle for human liberation, that even when confronted with the reality of the practical weight and efficacy of ideological and philosophical conceptions in obscuring social antagonisms and cementing conditions of class rule, he nevertheless continued to refer to them as illusory. Thus, despite sketching the outlines of a historically original conception of ideology and philosophy within the terms of class power and domination, he nevertheless retained the nineteenth century conceptual distinction between the concrete knowledge provided by science and the speculative abstractions of ideology. In the face of the philosophers' obsession with ideas, abstract principles, and the omnipotence of consciousness (not to mention the abstract schemes of the various utopian socialist and communist sects), Marx needed to outline a realistic revolutionary theory of proletarian politics with a concrete foundation in the historical movement of class relations springing forth from the economic structure of production.

In short, as this paper has argued, the revolutionary politics of proletarian class praxis, for Marx, could only be grasped as the antipode to the purely scholastic, interpretive activity of philosophy. And I think it is from this standpoint that we can understand why Marx, even after abandoning the notion of the proletariat as a class with no particular class interests to assert, which at least opens up the possibility of a proletarian ideology (at least within the framework of his theorization of ideology in *The German Ideology*), never ultimately considered this palatable. Accordingly, as we have seen, in *The Poverty of*

*Philosophy*, the revolutionary theory of the communists, which consciously identifies itself with the specific standpoint and interests of the proletariat in the class struggle, is considered scientific, and not at all ideological. The polemical function performed by contrasting science with ideology is understandable against the backdrop of Marx's specific context and the problems with which he was grappling, in which the need to overcome the speculative philosophical schemes and socialist utopias then prevalent in the European workers' movement, was central.

Operating in a radically dissimilar historical and political context, the issues Gramsci needed to tackle were very different. Against the backdrop of international working class defeat and the rise of fascism, a viable struggle for proletarian hegemony within the Western parliamentary capitalist state formations required a sophisticated analytical prism for comprehending the concrete forms and modalities through which consensus is organized within a broader unitary class political power at the level of the state, i.e. the intricate networks of institutions, material structures and organizations, ideologies, practices and agents constitutive of civil society or the hegemonic apparatuses which provide the concrete basis for the constitution of a class's hegemony over a political class bloc of social forces, thus furnishing a class's domination at the level of political society with an expansive social basis, the concretely organized network of social relations that renders class power in the state more or less enduring. Thus, it was necessary to grasp the practical power and efficacy of ideas in solidifying ruling class hegemony over a political bloc of social forces, as a crucial means by which a class obtains the consent of other social strata over which it rules.

Within this framework, Gramsci's fundamental redefinition of all philosophy as hegemonic forms of organizing, coordinating, and condensing social relations of thought and knowledge represents a significant enrichment of the type of logic implied in Marx's own penetrating analyses of the mechanics of hegemonic processes, which for reasons already identified, he failed to pursue. It beckons us to question the traditional paradigm of philosophy as an autonomous and disinterested pursuit of "truth", and to consider the possibility that the speculative abstractions and conceptual universals of philosophy might, in reality, be performing a concrete function by obscuring social conflicts, projecting harmonic and unitary images in their place, and consequently, that they may be the general ideal form in which a determinate class manages to present their conditions of expansion as in the interests of everyone.

Furthermore, within this broader conception of philosophy, Gramsci succeeded in providing what Marx understandably could not, namely, a "philosophy from below", as Haug aptly calls it, understood as a mass-based, popular philosophy with the capacity to productively and effectively confront the

“philosophies of the philosophers”.<sup>1</sup> By reinterpreting the *Theses* within the framework of Labriola’s sketch of a non-metaphysical concept of immanence, Gramsci was able to re-elaborate the Marxian thesis of the this-worldliness of truth into the terms of an absolute immanence, in which theory is immanent in the mass practices it seeks to understand and elaborate. It is a reinterpretation wholly concordant with Gramsci’s general characterization of Marx as a militant theorist of politics and action, a non-systematic thinker in whom theoretical and practical activity are indissolubly intertwined, an eminently practical-critical character who had a sense of awareness of the masses.<sup>2</sup> As Frosini argues, for Gramsci ‘the philosophy of Marx is born at the moment in which this “sense of the masses” becomes elevated to a principle of knowledge’.<sup>3</sup>

Haug correctly notes a number of factors that enabled Gramsci to develop this conception of Marx’s thought as “philosophy” of praxis, including his lack of access to *The German Ideology* manuscripts, the late Engels’s re-appropriation of German classical philosophy, the subsequent reinsertion of philosophy into Marxism in the form of the metaphysics of dialectical materialism, and most importantly, because he went back to the distinctive Italian tradition of reading Marx as a philosopher of praxis, resurrecting Labriola in order to conduct a critical intervention into the debates concerning the nature and status of Marxist philosophy in 1920’s and 1930s, particularly in order to undercut the reversion to metaphysical system-building characteristic of the dialectical materialist philosophical orthodoxy.<sup>4</sup>

That being said, the rupture represented by Gramsci’s re-elaboration of Marx’s thought as a philosophy, in contrast to Marx, who did not consider his theory as thinkable in terms of philosophy, is not, as Haug tacitly suggests, a mere “terminological” difference. Rather, it is reflective of their ultimately very different understandings of philosophy. For even if Gramsci had known that Marx considered his thought anti-philosophical, the former undoubtedly would have still elaborated as philosophical. And this is precisely because Gramsci detected the hegemonic organizing capacities of philosophy, understood as hegemonic conceptions of the world. This is quite clear from his struggle against Croce over the eleventh thesis on Feuerbach. It is essential that Marxism not wholly abandon philosophy. What needed to be superseded was philosophy in its speculative form, while Marxism needed to reconstitute philosophy departing from the masses and the concrete political terrain of struggle. Only through the elaboration of a critical and coherent conception of the world on a mass basis, and its diffusion throughout the superstructures can the working masses reach the hegemonic or cathartic moment, i.e. ‘bringing about, in

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<sup>1</sup> Haug 2001, 84.

<sup>2</sup> Q 4, 10, 432, Q 4, 1, 419, Q 1, 152, 134, Q 1, 47, 57.

<sup>3</sup> Frosini 2009a, 31.

<sup>4</sup> Haug 2001, 82-5.



addition to economic and political unity, intellectual and moral unity, not on a corporate but on a universal level: the hegemony of a fundamental social group over the subordinate groups'.<sup>5</sup> In short, whereas for Marx, an effective revolutionary politics necessitated the abandonment of philosophy, for Gramsci, it required it, indeed it was absolutely essential.

I have nevertheless argued that despite this significant difference, Gramsci's reformulation of Marx's this-worldliness into an absolute immanence represents a profound enrichment and further development of the category of revolutionary praxis contained in the *Theses*, as a conception of the nature and dynamics of theorizing and knowing politically within the terrain of struggle. The partial and contingent nature of this, together with an original and sophisticated conception of the unity of theory and practice as the struggle for coherence and the capacity to act, which Gramsci developed within a framework that consistently grasped the practical functioning of ideological and philosophical constructions, all represent advances in relation to Marx. But these innovations, and Marx's limitations, as I have suggested, are related to the different contexts in which the two thinkers were operating, as well as the different problems with which they were attempting to grapple. Marx, despite his understandable shortcomings, had nevertheless developed precocious insights far ahead of his time, many of which anticipated Gramsci's later theoretical innovations. The latter, on the other hand, was able to further develop these insights, not through a reliable re-reading of Marx's work (probably impossible), but through an instrumentalized reading of Marx dictated by the needs of his own situation. The necessity to overcome the relapse into traditional metaphysical system-building that had permeated the conceptions of the philosophical status of Marxism in the 1920's and 30's, by reconstituting Marxist philosophy on the concrete terrain of struggle as a mass politics, essential in the context of crisis and defeat, led Gramsci to organize his entire philosophical reconstruction of Marx around the *Theses*, in order to re-politicize Marxism. In this way Gramsci contradicted his own methodological prescriptions to follow the rhythmic movement of Marx's thought, and to privilege those texts published under Marx's own authority.

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<sup>5</sup> Q 4, 38, 457-8.

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